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STAR WARS: ANDOR
Mon Mothma speaks

ELIO
Pixar goes intergalactic

THE BRIAN CLEMENS ARCHIVE
The unmade Doctor Who story

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH
Guy Ritchie's new fantasy

IRONHEART
Riri reborn

SUPERMAN
The DC universe begins anew!

EXCLUSIVE!

MEGAN 2.0

Slay, queen! The killer doll returns

PLUS! DANGEROUS ANIMALS | SILVER SURFER | THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY PRIDE 2025 | X-MEN | BLACK PANTHER | THE RUNNING MAN | MR TERRIFIC REVIVAL | STRANGER THINGS | THE CHANGELING | THE CHILD CATCHER!

FUTURE

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Captain's Log

Going to LA and having the opportunity to speak with Dan Trachtenberg about *Predator* was very exciting. Watching the first 20 minutes of his new animated movie, *Predator: Killer Of Killers*, was a fantastic surprise and I can't wait to see what else is in store.

You've all seen the trailer for *Predator: Badlands*, right? I was the first to ask him about *that* Weyland-Yutani moment – it definitely feels like we're heading into a *proper* combined universe that has Aliens and Predators and is ongoing... That's something I'm very excited about, as a huge fan of both. On that note, if you haven't checked out the Marvel comic-book series for them, they're among the best comics I've read in years.

It feels as though we have the success of *Prey* to thank for all this – rumours would have you believe that, like that movie, *Alien: Romulus* was intended for streaming only, too. If that's true, then someone, somewhere thankfully saw the opportunities for these two franchises to live not only on streaming platforms but the big screen also. Quite right, too.

But I'm getting way ahead of myself. This month sees two other cinematic icons return, M3GAN and Toothless the dragon, both of which I'm very excited about. And speaking of excitement, we're also digging into The Brian Clemens Archive in the first of several exclusive features over the coming months!

See you in four weeks!

Darren X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Very excited to see where the *Predator* franchise is going.

→ Universal is finally bringing a theme park to the UK – this is going to be next level!

→ Speaking of next-level theme parks, Universal Epic Universe in Orlando is absolutely incredible. The world-building is off the scale.

RANTS

→ I'm so far behind on *Star Wars* shows. My teenage self would be furious.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Loved* the scene in "Lux" featuring *Doctor Who* fans Hassan, Lizzie and Robyn: clever, funny, moving – I watched it over and over. Sort of hoping they pop up again in the season finale's end credits to give their verdict.

→ Rewatching *Years And Years* now it's on Netflix. Too much it predicted has come true. At least we haven't had a bank run?!

RANTS

→ We really need to address the quality of Blu-ray subtitling. This month, watching *Orlando* I was informed "[Cat mewls in distance]" as a peacock cried. And on a newsreel bonus, actress Dorothy Tutin became Dorothy *Putin*...

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Excited to see Ryan Gosling's *Star Wars* movie. Rylo Ken, anyone?

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ Season one of *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* was an absolute joy. Smart writing, heartfelt characterisation and such a gorgeous visual style, nodding to classic comic art while feeling box-fresh. Good to know there's more on the way.

→ The *Scarred For Life* podcast continues to make generational trauma a fun thing.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Andor* was some amazing *Star Wars* and fantastic prestige TV. We'll likely never get anything like this again, so savour it. Thank you, Tony Gilroy, for assembling such an incredible cast and creative team.

→ Universal's Fan Fest Nights gave *Back To The Future* fans the experience of a lifetime. Hope they do the same for other fandoms in coming years!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

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→ They might be dead on TV but they're alive and kicking in comics.

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→ Sharks and serial killers – no, it's not a new Netflix true crime documentary.

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PRIDE 2025

→ What's in store for the queer Marvel and DC characters celebrating Pride this year.

Melanie Scrofano (second left) as Dana.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Day Of The Dead

How the Harvey Award-nominated comic **Revival** became a Syfy series

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

WHAT IF YOU DIED, THEN CAME back to life like nothing happened? In 2012, writer Tim Seeley and artist Mike Norton explored that sobering scenario in their award-winning Image Comics series *Revival*. But it wasn't treated with the gravitas of a zombie story or bleak supernatural drama. Instead, Seeley and Norton grounded the incredible occurrences of "Revival Day" by keeping it inside the borders of the pragmatic Midwest town of Wausau, Wisconsin, with its quirky, salt-of-the-earth types.

Filmmaker Luke Boyce already knew Seeley; together with producer Aaron B Koontz, the trio collaborated on the film *Revealer* in 2022 which led to them developing *Revival* first as a film, then as a television series.

Boyce tells Red Alert that they figured out that an episodic format was best suited to capture the variety of tones – comedy, horror and thriller – that sets the comic apart. "One of the great things about the comic is it creates this big canvas for tone. It's something Tim does well, and that's one of the fun things about adapting Seeley. He does quirky within a very emotionally complex situation. Obviously he's a huge horror fan, and we're huge horror fans, so that mixes really well too."

While many might assume a dead people coming back to life premise implies a horror series, Boyce says the source material and their series are actually full of surprises. "Horror is a big part of this, but the rural noir aspect of *Revival* is something that we hadn't really seen before. It's this land-locked world that's dealing with a supernatural event and nobody knows what it is. There's a mystery on top of another mystery. And mystery gives you the opportunity to tell different kinds of mystery stories. There's a murder mystery, which lends itself to some procedural elements. And then there's a supernatural mystery that leads you to some thriller elements. You get a mix, like a *Fargo* with a *Stranger Things*."

Boyce says that most people they've shown the pilot to compare it to the supernatural French drama *Les Revenants*, and not *The Walking Dead*. "We had this thing that we would say a lot, that most zombie shows or movies are about survival, whereas ours is about loss and about life," he continues. "It's

Andy McQueen plays Ibrahim Ramin, a CDC scientist.

> It's really about morality and how we view morality in terms of identity

He's a firestarter. A twisted one, at that.

Romy Weltman (left) is Dana's younger sister, Em.

really about morality and how we view morality in terms of identity, and it's something that I don't think people think about on a daily basis, until you've dealt with a close death, and how that can really shape your view of morality."

The audience's way into Wausau is through the Cypress family, who all have a connection to the town's Revival Day event. Wayne (David James Elliott) is the no-nonsense patriarch and town sheriff; Dana (Melanie Scrofano) is his eldest daughter and a fellow cop; then there's his youngest daughter, Em (Romy Weltman).

Koontz says they spent a lot of time locking in the perfect Cypress family, especially when it came to Dana and Em. "The literal very first list we had, right at the top, there were three or four names, and Melanie Scrofano was right there," he says of the former lead of Syfy's cult hit *Wynonna Earp*.

"The biggest thing about what Melanie can do is she's so versatile. We wanted Dana to be flawed. We wanted Dana to have a rawness, a brashness to her, where she might get herself into some situations, but we're gonna really enjoy watching her get out of them. To do it with a sense of humour and to do it with an attitude is something that Melanie does well."

As for Em, played by Romy Weltman, Koontz says they spent the most amount of time trying to find her. "We looked at who can have this innocence that needs to be captured, but then has something under there that we can build on – maybe a darkness rumbling, bubbling under the surface that can become something. Even though Dana is very much our main character, the story's main character, in a way, is Em."

Koontz teases that two massive mysteries – Revival Day and a murder mystery – will dominate season one, and one of those two will be solved at the end of the season. "If we're fortunate to have a second season and beyond, we have crazy ideas," he says of expanding stories from the comics.

"There are elements to it that are seeded that will build and continue to grow from there. We've talked with Tim about them too, like where he wanted to go, but couldn't go, and things he thought about doing."

Revival is on Syfy in May; UK details TBC.

SCI-FACT! **Aaron Koontz personally sent a letter to actor Steven Ogg (*The Walking Dead*) to ask him to play preacher Blaine Abel.**

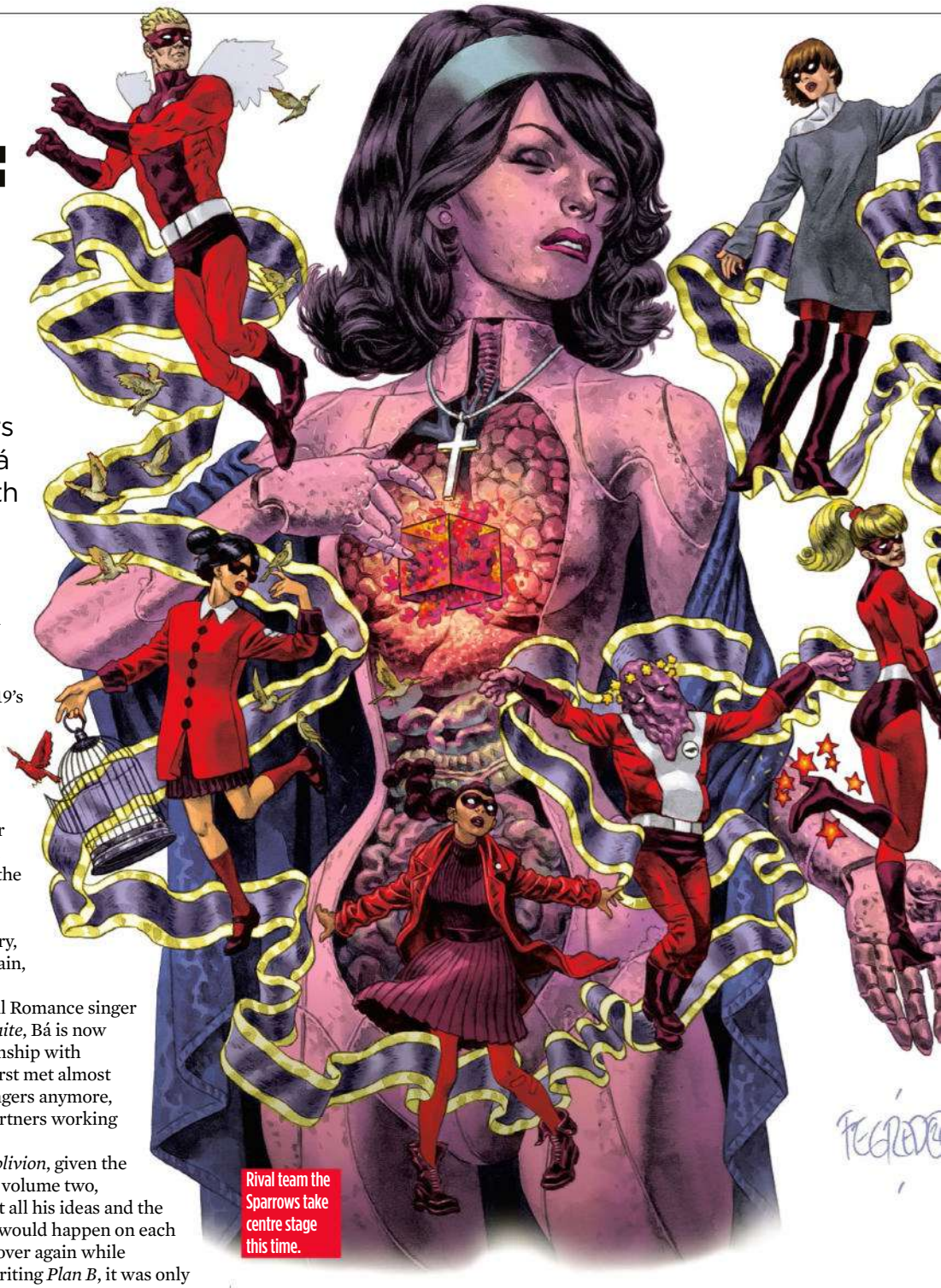
SCI-FACT! Based on Way's sketches and some earlier conversations, Bá initially designed the Sparrows in 2018 but has since refined them.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Band Of Brollies

Umbrella Academy creators Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá are returning to comics with new series **Plan B**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Rival team the Sparrows take centre stage this time.

WHILE THE TV SHOW HAS NOW concluded, creators Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá are returning to *The Umbrella Academy* for the first time since 2019's *Hotel Oblivion* with new Dark Horse Comics miniseries *Plan B*. As its title suggests, the six-parter takes the adopted superhero siblings in a different direction to their on-screen counterparts.

"After we finished *Hotel Oblivion*, we never stopped working on the comics," Bá tells Red Alert. "We've been working on this story for the last five years and we're truly excited that it's finally seeing the light of day. The television show helped bring a new audience to our story, and it's great being able to tell it in comics again, the way it was originally envisioned."

Having collaborated with the My Chemical Romance singer since 2008's inaugural volume, *Apocalypse Suite*, Bá is now sharing writing duties with Way. "My relationship with Gerard has evolved tremendously since we first met almost two decades ago," he recalls. "We're not strangers anymore, working on an abstract idea he had. We're partners working on this world we built together.

"My story input began to grow on *Hotel Oblivion*, given the time it took to get back to it after we finished volume two, *Dallas*, in 2015. Gerard and I would talk about all his ideas and the entire story he wanted to tell, deciding what would happen on each new arc, each new book. We had to revisit it over again while helping the TV writers. So when we began writing *Plan B*, it was only natural to bounce ideas around and write this together from now on."

Plan B centres around rival team the Sparrows, who were introduced at the end of *Hotel Oblivion* but have since played a prominent role in the TV series. "The idea was there from the beginning, as when the Sparrows made their big, mysterious entrance in *Hotel Oblivion*, we didn't give much more information about them," explains Bá. "The TV show caught up with our story and moved it forward in its own way, which was actually the opposite dynamic from when the show first aired – back then we had the comics first. It was fun seeing things we hadn't yet told appearing on the show and wondering how the readers would react when we finally show it in the comics. As with everything else, we do things differently in the comics – the Sparrows are no exception."

The story follows directly on from *Hotel Oblivion*. "Readers will get to know who the Sparrows are, what they want and how they'll co-exist with the Umbrella Academy," continues Bá. "It's an evolution of a study of the superhero genre, expanding our world, going deeper into characters' backstories and our original plan for the whole story moving forward. It's been great getting to tell this story, and we still have more to tell. We're going to tell the main story to the end, no matter how long it may take."

The Umbrella Academy: Plan B is out on 11 June.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Days Of Future Past

Kamala Khan journeys back in X-history in all-new **Giant-Size X-Men** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

GIANT-SIZE X-MEN introduced characters like Storm and Colossus when it first appeared in 1975, and Marvel is marking its 50th anniversary with a new series of interconnecting one-shots. Spinning out of this year's Free Comic Book Day issue, the four-parter not only revisits 1975's seminal birth of the New X-Men but also 1980's Dark Phoenix Saga, 1995's Age Of Apocalypse and 2005's House Of M, illustrated respectively by Adam Kubert, Rod Reis, CF Villa and Francesco Manna. But with the added monkey wrench of Kamala Khan thrown into the mix...

"Those dates created a gravity that demanded some sort of celebration," says Collin Kelly. "Which in turn allows us to take readers on a journey that looks at these events with new eyes."

"It's safe to say that no self-respecting *X-Men* writer hasn't read and loved Len Wein and Dave Cockrum's historical masterpiece," adds Jackson Lanzing. "Our copies of *Giant Size X-Men* issue one have been read so many times they're falling apart. Writing a book like this requires an enormous amount of research and fealty to the source material. Kamala Khan may be a bull in the china shop that is *X-Men* history, but Collin and I had to be surgeons."

Having discovered that she was a mutant as well as an Inhuman, Ms Marvel was the perfect candidate to take a trip through time, although she is concerned about retconning X-continuity.

"Like the readers, Kamala is an enormous fan of these stories," says Kelly. "While the exact details might have been lost to history, she knows these events as actual adventures the X-Men went on, which means she's uniquely positioned to understand the catastrophic consequences that might come with mucking about in the timeline. If fans are worried we're going to break X-history, Kamala is way more worried that she'll be the one doing it!"

"Of all the aspects that make up Kamala Khan, being a mutant is not only the most recent but the one she has the least experience tackling," continues Lanzing. "Discovering what that identity means to her is a core part of that journey as she faces some of that culture's most definitive moments, and not for nothing. Her Inhuman powers are all derived from the Terrigen Mists, so are her mutant powers inaccessible to her, and can they be integrated? If they can't be, what does that make Kamala in the eyes of other mutants, and if they can be, what does that do to Kamala's self-perception?"

Will Ms Marvel be able to keep the X-timeline together?

Legion plays a pivotal role in what unfolds. "The meteor that hits our particular history is a brand-new conception of his character," Kelly teases, "but how it comes about and why it's bringing him all the way back to the birth of the New X-Men is a reveal saved for the book."

> **"Like us, Kamala is an enormous fan of these stories"**

"This isn't Legion's first time wrecking history, as his actions caused the Age of Apocalypse," adds Lanzing. "So revisiting that story with him has been a really interesting chapter of this saga."

Free Comic Book Day 2025: Fantastic Four/ Giant-Size X-Men is out now, Giant-Size X-Men is out on 28 May.

SCI-FACT! **Chris Claremont contributed to the plot of *Giant-Size X-Men* before replacing Wein as writer with *Uncanny X-Men* issue 94.**

Zephyr (Hassie Harrison) is taken by Tucker (Jai Courtney).

Never bring a frying pan to a knife fight. On a boat.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bite Club

It's a game of cat, mouse and shark in Sean Byrne's horror thriller **Dangerous Animals**

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

A boat hook is probably not going to cut it...

AFTER MAKING A name for himself with *The Loved Ones* and *The Devil's Candy*, Sean Byrne all but vanished from horror. Now the Australian director returns – though he's adamant he never truly left.

"I've been writing constantly and had a handful of scripts optioned," he tells Red Alert. "But the unfortunate truth is, if you're drawn to R-rated material about humans hunting humans with rich, disturbing characterisation, it's not easy to get those films off the ground – Hollywood's so dominated by IP [intellectual property] now."

Like his earlier films, *Dangerous Animals* taps into Byrne's ongoing fascination with the darker side of human nature. This time, the killer is Tucker (Jai Courtney), a shark-dive operator who abducts victims, holds them captive aboard his boat and feeds them to the sharks he's baited below. "The sharks are basically his weapon," Byrne explains. "If Michael has his knife and Freddy has his fingers, Tucker has his sharks. He's the puppeteer."

> **"In a way, it's Wolf Creek on water, but it takes its lead from Jaws"**

He laughs as he recalls one of the taglines floating around during production: *It's actually safer in the water*. "I think that's the real point of difference," he says. "It's a shark film fused with a serial killer film – and it's the first shark film I've seen where the sharks aren't indiscriminate killers. In a way, it's *Wolf Creek* on water, but it absolutely takes its lead from *Jaws* in terms of suspense. For me, shark fins are the definition of tension – you see them slicing the surface, never knowing when or where the attack will come."

Recent shark films, he says, have leaned too heavily into digital spectacle. "I think they've become a bit videogamey, with everything happening underwater. I wanted to bring back the classic edge-of-your-seat suspense. But really, what excites me most is that in this story, man is the real monster."

Byrne describes Tucker as "as roguish and charming as he is dangerous", and says he has long admired Courtney's work in films like *Terminator Genisys* and *The Suicide Squad*. "There's a really great subversive character actor beneath the leading-man muscle, and I don't think he'd really had the chance to show that yet. He was excited about the role from the start. He's incredibly charismatic, physically intimidating – a strong foundation to build on. But he also understood the opportunity horror presents for great actors – like Christian Bale in *American Psycho*, Kathy Bates in *Misery* or Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence Of The Lambs*. These roles can be showstoppers for the right actor, and I feel like this is the kind of part Jai was born to play."

Tucker and his chum. (Yes, that's a fishing gag.)

Director Sean Byrne (left), with Jai Courtney.

An old, retired firefighting boat was repurposed as a film set.

Hassie Harrison plays Zephyr, the movie's "final girl", a free-spirited surfer with a guarded side. What drew Byrne to Harrison was her natural likeability – "almost Sandra Bullock-esque," he says – paired with a quiet toughness rooted in her Texas upbringing. "That combination really mattered," the director explains. "When you've got a character who puts walls up and keeps people at arm's length, you don't want the audience to be at arm's length. You still need to sense there's heart and soul underneath, even when she's not showing it. And Hassie ticks that box – she gives a really strong performance. I mean, it's a real fish-out-of-water story."

Filmed on the Gold Coast in Queensland, much of the production took place aboard a decommissioned firefighting vessel, refitted with cages to hold Tucker's captives. "What I love about it is that it's painted orange and yellow – Australia's life-saving colours," Byrne notes. "So it's a complete subversion of what those colours are supposed to represent."

Dangerous Animals is set to surface just a couple of weeks before the 50th anniversary of the granddaddy of all shark films. While Byrne has a deep affection for *Jaws*, he's quick to acknowledge the lasting damage it did to the shark's reputation.

"They're still one of the top three fears for people, and that's pretty much because of that movie. In reality, there are fewer than 10 shark attacks a year – and that's usually when a shark mistakes a human for a seal. So the fear is largely misplaced. Sharks have been unfairly vilified. I wanted to walk that line: yes, they're scary, but they're not coming for the audience."

Make no mistake, Byrne delivers the blood and bite. But beneath the surface, there's something more. Some of the real sharks featured in the film bear scars – torn fins, gouged flanks – which are evidence of violent encounters with humans. It's a quiet but powerful reminder: *Dangerous Animals* also functions as a pointed commentary on shark conservation.

And once the feeding frenzy is over, Byrne isn't slowing down. In September, he heads to Ontario to begin work on his next project – a "small-town serial killer film with a bit of a twist". Clearly, he's still swimming in dangerous waters.

Dangerous Animals is in cinemas from 6 June.

SCI-FACT! **In 2024, there were 47 confirmed unprovoked shark attacks worldwide, significantly below average.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Ryan Gosling leads Shawn Levy's **Star Wars: Starfighter**, set to disturb the Force on 28 May 2027.
- Sam Neill joining the next **Godzilla x Kong** movie.
- **Spider-Man: Brand New Day** arrives 31 July 2026.
- Emma Mackey is the White Witch in Greta Gerwig's adaptation of **The Chronicles Of Narnia**.
- Robert Pattinson in the frame for Denis Villeneuve's **Dune: Messiah**.
- Jesse Plemons to play the young Plutarch Heavensbee in **The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping**.
- M Night Shyamalan's next is titled **Remain**, with Jake Gyllenhaal and Phoebe Dynevor tipped to star.
- *Poor Things* screenwriter Tony McNamara on script duty for Taika Waititi's **Star Wars** movie.
- *The Nun*'s Gary Dauberman to produce reboot of '90s slasher **Urban Legend**.
- **Beetlejuice 3** and **Minecraft 2** in development at Warner Bros.
- Ernie Hudson voicing Combat Carl in **Toy Story 5**.
- Toho developing a sequel to 2023's **Godzilla Minus One**. Huzzah!

EMMA MACKAY PICTURE © ALAN CHAPMAN/DAVE BENETT/GETTY

SCI-FACT! Al Letson's previous works include ***Julius X***, a play retelling Shakespeare's ***Julius Caesar***, set in Harlem in 1965.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Benevolent Brainiac

Ahead of his appearance in *Superman*, **Mr Terrific: Year One** tells the origin of DC's super-genius

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

TAKING A BREAK from scripting series like *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*, Al Letson wrote a proposal for a Mr Terrific TV show "because he really dug the character". But after director James Gunn tweeted a picture of Edi Gathegi in costume as the character on the set of this summer's *Superman*, he's turned it into *Mr Terrific: Year One*, a six-issue miniseries that's illustrated by Valentine De Landro and Edwin Galmon.

"I'm just filling in the gaps, so I re-read his first appearance in *Spectre* and some other old stories," says Letson, referring to modern-day Mr Terrific Michael Holt's debut in 1997's *Spectre* issue 54. "I was just trying to find the sweet spot, and I realised that issue is really about the Spectre telling stories about the Golden Age. Michael is a character in it, but he isn't the central character, so it felt like a good place to jump off and really fill it in. Like what happened between that point and the time he later joined the Justice Society of America, as there's not a lot there. While I love that issue of *Spectre*, the world has shifted and changed since then, so I'm updating some ideas in it."

Admitting that he's grateful for online research, Letson enjoyed taking on a character with a super-genius intellect. "It's been a fun exercise but it's definitely hard work – the thing about Michael is that he's always about three steps ahead of everybody else," he explains. "You don't want everybody else to seem stupid, so therefore you have to think three steps ahead yourself and plan it all out because I'm nowhere near as brilliant as Michael is."

Having blamed himself for the accidental death of his wife and unborn child, Michael is driven to become Mr Terrific by his grief. It inspires him to take on the mantle of the first Mr Terrific, Terry Sloane, after a fateful encounter with the Spectre, which is recounted in issue two.

"He's motivated by loss, but it was important for us to do a little more with that," says Letson. "We wanted him to be motivated by responsibility, a feeling that he has to do something in this world. I love it when characters feel responsibility to go out and make changes in the world, which is what happens when someone puts on a mask or a cape, or creates the T-spheres [Mr Terrific's high-tech balls] to fly through the air and help fight injustice."

> **"It felt like a good place to jump off and really fill it in"**

Shifting between the past and present, the series also has implications for current DC continuity. "There's the present-day storyline with Darkseid having gone through the rift and created the Absolute Universe, and then there's the flashback story that tells the *Year One* story," teases Letson. "Those two things are working together to tell a more complex story. When this is all over, if you go back and read last year's *DC All-In Special*, it gives some background that you didn't previously know was there."

Mr Terrific: Year One is out on 28 May.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Starman's Swansong

The Sentinel of Space soars for the last time in **Death Of The Silver Surfer**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

HAVING FIRST FOUND the Sentinel of Space by reading his formative story in *Origins Of Marvel Comics*, writer Greg Pak is now charting Norrin Radd's final voyage in *Death Of The Silver Surfer*. And while Norrin's lover Shalla-Bal wields the Power Cosmic in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps*, a new Herald of Galactus will arrive by the five-parter's end.

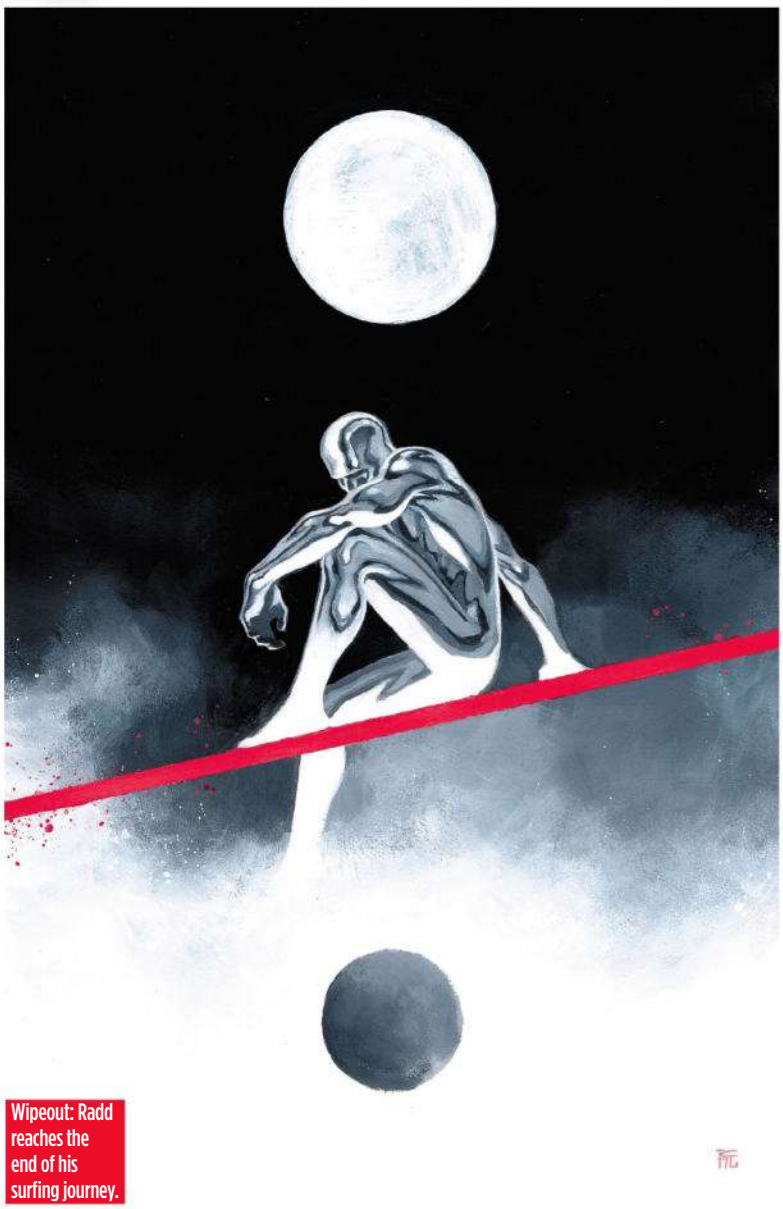
"He was so strange, dramatic and tragic," recalls Pak. "Just a phenomenal, striking character with a tone I hadn't seen anywhere before. *The Incredible Hulk* television series introduced me to the literary concept of tragedy, but the Silver Surfer introduced me to notions of existential angst – big, heady stuff in a surreal, mind-bending and sometimes goofy package. I loved it then and I love it now."

While many Marvel heroes have died and been resurrected – including the Sky-Rider himself in J Michael Straczynski and Esad Ribic's *Silver Surfer: Requiem* in 2007 – this time it's apparently for keeps. "Cosmic Marvel stories are full of tales with death and sacrifice, so digging into these high-stakes themes with the Surfer feels right in the character's wheelhouse in the best of ways," continues Pak, admitting that there's more creative freedom with a supposedly lesser protagonist. "There are ways you can do more in a story like this with a Marvel character that's not the centrepiece of multiple books. The glorious thing is that anything can happen here, with real stakes and consequences."

With the Surfer returning to a war-ravaged Earth, a brand-new formidable adversary emerges, which seemingly leads to Norrin's demise. "We're not revealing her name just yet, but she's cocky, dangerous and ruthless, and if we're doing our job right you'll hate her and love her in equal measure," teases Pak. "She opens up a whole new corner of the Marvel Universe with some new characters, themes and world-building that feel more relevant with each passing day. And her mom is also awesome and plays a big role in the story, but I'll say no more. Apart from that, yes, there's a Galactus hook somewhere in here but it's unlike any other Galactus hook you've ever seen!"

We can also expect to see Norrin's long-time allies, the Fantastic Four. "They play a big role in the series, as do a number of other established Marvel characters who have had significant encounters with the Surfer over the years and fit right in with our big themes and plot hook," adds Pak, who is best known for his long run with the Incredible Hulk. "I can't reveal too much more right now, but I will say that one of those characters is one of the Marvel heroes that folks ask me about the most."

Pak is also enjoying collaborating with artist Sumit Kumar and colourist Frank D'Armata. "The Surfer has to float, and Sumit's light, fluid line sets him loose in just the right way," he says. "And Frank always brings powerful, exciting colours, which is so important in a book like this that's packed with surreal imagery and astounding action."



Wipeout: Radd reaches the end of his surfing journey.

Death Of The Silver Surfer is out on 11 June.

SCI-FACT! **Created by Jack Kirby, the Silver Surfer debuted in 1966's *Fantastic Four* issue 48 before spinning off into his own title in 1968.**

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in 1946's *Sensation Comics* issue nine, Blue Snowman first came out as genderfluid in 2021's *DC Love Is A Battlefield*.**

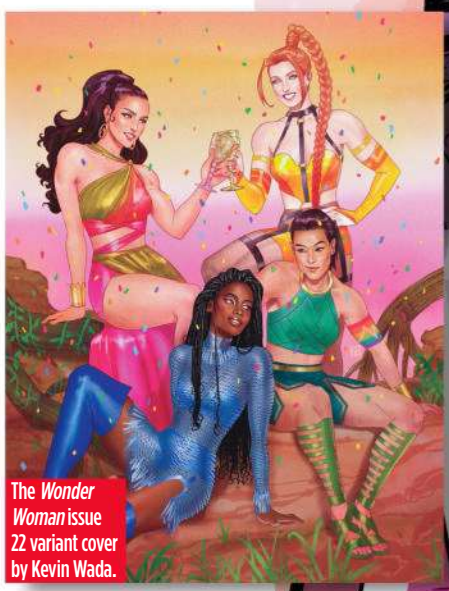
WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Last Orders

Drink a toast to Alan Scott, Blue Snowman and Ethan Rivera in **DC Pride 2025**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Hayden Sherman's *Justice League Unlimited* variant cover.



The *Wonder Woman* issue 22 variant cover by Kevin Wada.

WHILE PREVIOUS VOLUMES HAVE been composed of self-contained stories, *DC Pride 2025* takes the form of a sequence of interconnected tales all based around an old tavern, a popular meeting place for queer characters like Green Lantern Alan Scott.

"When editor Andrea Shea first approached me about the framing story, we talked about the need for safe spaces" says writer Tim Sheridan, who is joined by artists Emilio Pilliu and Giulio Macaione. "It just so happened there was a story in the first *DC Pride* where Alan met his son Todd and Todd's boyfriend at a Gotham City restaurant that was once an underground gay bar where a young Scott fell for the ill-fated love of his life, Johnny Ladd. It's closing its doors, and that's why some of our characters are here – to say goodbye."

New character Ethan Rivera links the 96-pager together. "It was very important to spotlight someone unpowered, but nonetheless a hero in his own right," says Josh Trujillo, co-writer with Jude Doyle for artist AL Kaplan. "Ethan's resilience is one of his defining traits, along with his empathy. We feature him throughout the book, and he's the heart of everything *DC Pride* is about."

"What I like about Ethan is he's able to face down huge forces without superpowers," adds Doyle. "He's a trans person living through this backlash like the rest of us, and it's taken a chunk out of his life and changed his future. So to be dropped into a world of superheroic and cosmic powers and having to hold his own and decide his own fate in a context where everyone seems much more powerful than he isn't a totally unfamiliar situation."

Alongside artist Alex Moore, Doyle is also taking on lowly villain turned trans icon Blue Snowman. "Blue Snowman has mostly been a joke in recent years, and their gender identity started, like everything else, as a gag," continues Doyle. "You had this ice-powered supervillain who stomped around in a masculine snowman suit, and many of those stories ended with a hero ripping the head off the suit and exclaiming that Snowman was 'Really a girl!' It's since been clarified that, no, Blue is gender-fluid and the suit is part of their gender expression. I wanted to give Blue a day in the sun and see what it looks like when everything goes right for them."

Meanwhile, Black Lightning creator Jenny Blake Isabella charts her own personal story, Illustrated by Sara Soler. "I've always tried to write and create diverse characters, and the DC Pride anthologies have added more diversity to comics," says Isabella. "After I came out as transgender earlier this year, DC offered me the opportunity to share part of my journey with the readers. I've done a lot of cool things in my 50-plus years in comics but this story is one of the things I'm most proud of. I see myself in it, and I hope readers will see something of themselves in it too."

DC Pride 2025 is out on 4 June.

The main cover features art by Lucas Werneck.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Sentinels Of LGBTQ+ Liberty

Love, not hate, is the theme of **Marvel United: A Pride Special**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

DESIGNED, ACCORDING TO AL EWING, AS "a statement against hate", *Marvel United: A Pride Special* pulls no punches. Harking back to 1941's original *Captain America Comics* issue one, which featured a cover image of Cap thumping Adolf Hitler, Ewing's story (one of four) spotlights two characters with close ties to Steve Rogers in his childhood friend Arnie Roth and Aaron Fischer's Captain America of the Railways, who battles the Hate-Monger, a clone of the Führer himself.

"As well as being gay, Fischer is brave, caring, questioning of authority, committed to justice and all the other things that make Captain America more than just a muscle man wrapped in a flag," says Ewing, who teams up with artist Kei Zama. "Cap's joined by his trans teammate Escapade, trans super-scientist Charlene McGowan and everyone's favourite genderfluid trickster, Loki – along with a guest appearance by one of the most powerful LGBTQ+ beings in the Marvel Universe. Turns out we're everywhere!"

Working with *Avengers Academy* artist Pablo Collar, Anthony Oliveira focuses on Roth, introduced by JM DeMatteis and Mike Zeck in 1982's *Captain America* issue 268. "Arnie was created at the height of the AIDS crisis," explains Oliveira. "When the world was letting gay men die in droves, Captain America stood with his gay best friend, loving and supporting him to the very end. Arnie was also there at what is in many ways the beginning of the modern Marvel Universe. When Steve Rogers was deciding what heroism looked like, he looked to his gay friend. Before the muscles and the super strength, there was Arnie. They made each other into heroes together, which is important and foundational."

> **"This story is part of telling that lost history"**

Stating that "Arnie and Steve built the world we live in," Oliveira is celebrating Arnie's legacy. "Our story is about Arnie and Steve's close friendship and follows up on the expansion we've been giving Arnie's history and personal life in *Avengers Academy*," the writer says. "This is the friendship that made Steve who he is, and Arnie's adventures are deeply rooted in the formation of the Marvel Universe as we now understand it. This is part of telling that lost history – stories that couldn't be told because of who Arnie was."

Pitting her against "goofy-named" D'Spayre, writer Zoe Tunnell and artist Federica Mancin take on Black Cat. "One theme I wanted to dig into was regret and longing, two things lots of queer people feel all the time," says Tunnell. "Felicia has such a parade of messy relationships, and D'Spayre was a perfect foil to tap into those negative feelings."

Finally, insisting they are not "simply chaotic villains", writer Wyatt Kennedy and artist Bayleigh Underwood return to Mystique and Destiny after last year's *X-Men: The Wedding Special*. "Their mythic eternal love makes them instantly compelling," says Kennedy. "Hopefully this story will remind readers that if you strip away the chaos and bombastic action, these are people who just want to be happy."

Marvel United: A Pride Special is out on 4 June.

SCI-FACT! **JM DeMatteis wrote a scene making it very clear Arnie Roth was gay in 1984, but "a page or two... was rewritten by Other Hands".**

SCI-FACT! **Priest modelled Everett Ross (played on-screen by Martin Freeman) on the late Matthew Perry's *Friends* character, Chandler Bing.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Dead Reckoning

Joe Quesada and Christopher Priest return to Marvel Knights and Black Panther with **The World To Come**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

PAIRING LEADING CREATORS with some then lesser-known characters, *Marvel Knights* had a seismic impact after debuting in 1998. Now, former Marvel Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada is returning to the imprint he co-founded with Jimmy Palmiotti, teaming up with *Marvel Knights: Black Panther* writer Christopher Priest on brand new miniseries *The World To Come*. Though it has been in the works since 2018, Quesada insists that there's been no grand plan to revive the boutique label.

"Priest called me with an idea that revolved around the Black Panther and revisiting some old friends from the *Marvel Knights* era," Quesada tells Red Alert. "He told me the story, the unexpected twists and turns, and layered nuances only he can bring to a story of this kind. As he was pitching it, I could see it in my mind's eye, and when that happens, I know it's a story I have to draw."

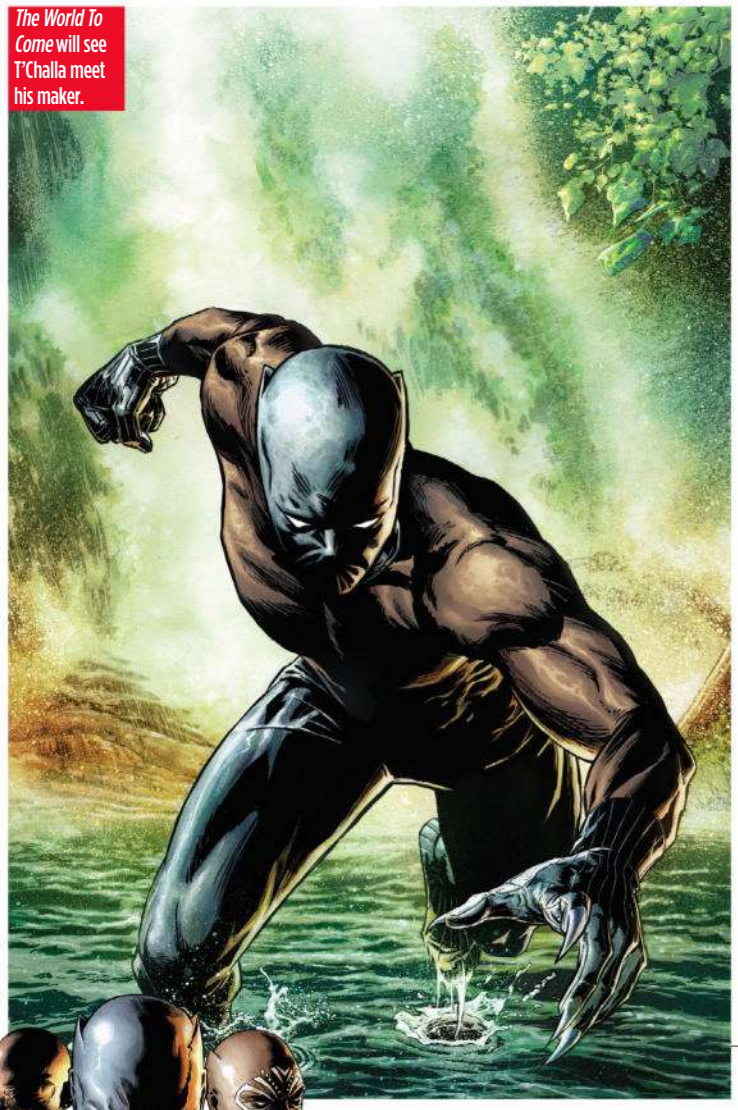
"A slow burn" due to his duties as Marvel's Chief Creative Officer, it has taken the now-freelance Quesada until recently to focus on the six-parter, which much like *Marvel Knights*' original output, is worthy of an event book in itself. "This story is different, because we're going back to play with those toys, mixing and matching and creating a world-spanning and universe-shaking story," he continues. "I'm not going to give you the old, tired hyperbole 'Nothing will be the same again!' but what Priest and I are having a blast, telling what we hope is a fun – emphasis on fun! – comic book story."

Opening in Wakanda, the story quickly grows to encompass the entire Marvel Universe. "The Panther is all over the book, but after talking about it, it expanded in scope, because there's no way that the events that occur in T'Challa's world wouldn't have reverberations elsewhere," says Quesada. "Also, T'Challa is a badass, and I really wanted to draw him!"

While Quesada teases, "Who said T'Challa is gone? All we've said is that he dies!" it begins with his death, leaving behind the technologically advanced African nation's Vibranium and a mysterious crypt of dark secrets. Nefarious interests are soon fighting over the spoils, leading to the appearance of some familiar faces. "You'll see some of the old *Black Panther* cast, and we also get to meet some new characters that will have a lasting impact," he says. "Also, with Priest writing it, it's a safe bet to assume that [government agent] Everett K Ross might make a cameo."

Although it harks back to Priest's previous *Black Panther* run, *The World To Come* is accessible to anyone who first became acquainted with T'Challa through the Marvel Cinematic Universe. "There are absolutely callbacks, but they're done in a way that won't confuse new readers," continues Quesada. "There's humour, action, surprises, sorrow, joy and lots and lots of action! While the movies have made the character popular, that isn't why I wanted to do it. Priest just wrote a really good comic series, which is thought-provoking, insane and has a ton of heart."

Marvel Knights: The World To Come is out on 4 June.



The World To Come will see T'Challa meet his maker.

Joe Quesada say this is a "universe-shaking story".

With the Black Panther hotseat vacant, who will step forwards?

The TV cast were out in force at the Broadway launch of *The First Shadow*.

JAMIE MCCARTHY/GETTY

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

Netflix has announced the date for their next global fan event, Tudum. It will take place on Saturday 31 May and be live-streamed on their platform (Sunday 1 June, 1am BST). It promises the first look at a number of their most popular productions, including, of course, *Stranger Things* season five.

The title for the animated *Stranger Things* series has been announced. The show, inspired by 80s cartoons, will be called *Stranger Things: Tales From '85*. The series is currently in the works with Eric Robles as showrunner.

"We've always dreamed of an animated *Stranger Things* in the vein of the Saturday-morning cartoons that we grew up loving, and to see this dream realised has been absolutely thrilling," said *ST* creators The Duffer Brothers.

"We couldn't be more blown away by what Eric Robles and his team have come up with – the scripts and artwork are incredible, and we can't wait to share more with you! The adventure continues..."

Jamie Campbell Bower (Vecna), Charlie Heaton (Jonathan), Natalia Dyer (Nancy), Noah Schnapp (Will), Priah Ferguson (Erica), Cara Buono (Karen), Brett Gelman (Murray) and Matthew Modine (Dr Brenner) all attended the opening night of *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* on Broadway, alongside Matt and Ross Duffer and exec producer Shawn Levy.

Ross Duffer explained to *The Hollywood Reporter* that "the play starts to tee up some things that are going to be big reveals in season five without giving everything away, because we want season five to be able to stand on its own obviously. So it was a tightrope to walk for sure."

He also spoke about the final season, saying, "It is thrilling and it's our fastest start we've ever had – our heroes are in action right away, but I think ultimately, hopefully, it's our most emotional season yet. Those final episodes, the goal is that they hit pretty hard because in a lot of ways it's about the end of this journey we've all had and also the end of childhood."

Shawn Levy, speaking on the red carpet for *The First Shadow*, told *The Hollywood Reporter* that the final day "was as emotional as you could imagine".

"It was happy, it was a relief because it's been a long haul. Season five was a beast – it took a year just to film season five; there were strikes, there were shutdowns. But it was also goodbye... Goodbye to these stories, goodbye to Hawkins. We all, at that last table read, knew that this was the end of a chapter; we might all go on to great, successful experiences but you're lucky if you get one *Stranger Things* in your life. That'll never happen again and I think that we all know it and we all cherish it."

Also speaking on the red carpet, Noah Schnapp said "people are going to be truly devastated" when they see the final season. "As sad as it was, I'm so excited to see the world's reaction to watching the finale because there's not going to be a dry eye. It's going to be sad."

Clothing brand RSVLTS have added a new range to their *Stranger Things* collection.

Short-sleeve button-up shirts include "Friends Don't Lie", "Battle Of Starcourt", "Surfer Boy Pizza", "Welcome To Hellfire" and "The Art Of Four". There's also a "Hellfire Club" dad hat and a "Mind Flayer Mayhem" reversible bomber jacket. Visit rsvlts.com.

Speaking to *JOE* while promoting *Thunderbolts**, David Harbour (Hopper) said: "We did a read-through of the final episode. I remember we were going to do it in this big publicity way, everyone was going to be there, and I was like: 'Can we do just us, just the people that have been here – the Duffers and the cast.' We did it just sitting around on couches and I remember little Noah Schnapp, Finn Wolfhard [Mike] and Millie [Bobby Brown, who plays Eleven/Jane] just crying their eyes out...

"They were just crying like only young people can cry, and there was something just so special about that. I was like: 'Wow, this is a really big deal, for a lot of the world and certainly for these kids.' There was something very, very moving and beautiful in it."

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

SCI-FACT! **Finn Wolfhard recently joined Djo, aka co-star Joe Keery, on stage in Toronto to perform the song "Flash Mountain".**

Stars and director getting all luvvie.

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

It's Showtime

Move over, Arnie... It's Glen Powell's turn to tackle **The Running Man** WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

FOR STEPHEN KING fans, Edgar Wright promises audiences the real deal when *The Running Man* is released in cinemas later this year. King's original novel – published under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman in 1982 – was adapted into an Arnold Schwarzenegger-led movie in 1987, but the plot raced wildly away from the source material. Wright pledges that his 2025 big-screen vision of the story will be much more faithful to the book.

"King's novel was one of my favourites as a teen, but the real story has never been told the way it was written," explains Wright. "When I got the opportunity to make this film the way that I've always seen it, I jumped right in and didn't look back!"

Speaking to a super-hyped industry crowd at CinemaCon in Las Vegas, the British filmmaker admits he's had his eyes on the project for decades. "Over the years, journalists would repeatedly ask me what movie I would most like to remake, and I would always say *The Running Man*. I think it even goes back to interviews for *Shaun Of The Dead*. That's why I immediately said yes when an email arrived from [producer] Simon Kinberg asking if I had any interest in remaking it."

For the 2025 movie, Wright pushed for a practical approach to special effects and stunts in order to add a sense of realism to the project. This appealed to leading man Glen Powell, who had to ensure he was in peak physical condition to play the role. "I knew we were going to be shooting a lot of practical stunts, so I definitely got in what I call bulletproof shape," the *Twisters* star explains.

"I knew I was going to have to take some hits, but I don't think I fully prepped myself for what we tackle on this one. The practical approach works for the audience because when you're falling and hitting the ground – and you're really doing it – the audience feels that. When the explosions are real and you're jumping through it, it's a different experience and the audience invest more."

From the brief footage showcased at CinemaCon, Red Alert can confirm the film is frenetic, bloody and filled with chaotic thrills. "I've fallen from buildings. I've jumped through explosions. I've had my body thrashed and smashed. I've gone through fire," Powell says with a smile. "I can honestly say I've never worked harder on a movie in my life."

Wright assures audiences that Powell is the perfect actor for the lead role of Ben Richards. "He's exactly the right person to do this because you haven't seen him do anything like this before," the director says. "One of the things about the novel is that Ben is a real everyman. He doesn't want to go on this game show called The Running Man. He's willing to go on a smaller game show to get some quick cash – but by a series of circumstances, he

Edgar Wright, the man who never ages.

Powell, Wright, Colman Domingo and Josh Brolin at CinemaCon.

Glen Powell *is* the running man. See?

ends up on the bigger show. He's a very reluctant contestant."

When it comes to the high-speed chases and action sequences of the dystopian thriller, Powell knew exactly who to call upon for stunt advice: Tom Cruise. "When I was cast, Tom was my very first call," he reveals. "Tom said to me, 'Film yourself running as soon as possible. You don't look as cool as you think you do.'"

The Running Man team. And Tom Cruise.

It turns out that Cruise was correct. "I talked to running coaches, and the fun thing was they all said to me, 'There's only one actor who knows how to run on the big screen, and that's Tom Cruise.' I guess he's *the* running man for a reason."

Powell and Cruise appeared at CinemaCon to promote their upcoming movies – *The Running Man* and *Mission Impossible: The Final Reckoning* – but what the convention crowds didn't know was that Cruise snuck into the venue early to watch footage of the new sci-fi film alongside his *Top Gun: Maverick* co-star.

"Watching that teaser with Tom Cruise is a memory I will never forget," admits Powell, speaking to Red Alert later in the day. "He was so stoked after watching it. What's been amazing about my relationship with Tom is the fact he's a guy that doesn't hide his excitement. He loves the theatrical experience and working hard and putting your body on the line to entertain audiences."

> **"The real story has never been told the way it was written"**

Tom Cruise isn't the only person to receive kudos from Glen Powell. The actor also has heaps of praise for Edgar Wright. "Look, this movie doesn't just have touches or flavours of things audiences love; this one is the full meal," Powell explains. "Honestly, you're in for a real cinematic treat. What Edgar has cooked up with this one is nothing short of extraordinary."

The Running Man is in cinemas from 7 November.

SCI-FACT! **King used a pseudonym because publishers then believed authors should only publish one book a year.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- **The Last Of Us** renewed for a third season.
- *Adolescence*'s Warp Films to turn '80s nuclear bleak-a-thon **Threads** into a TV series.
- John Lithgow, Janet McTeer, Paapa Essiedu and Nick Frost to star in HBO's **Harry Potter**.
- Ryan Coogler talking to Gillian Anderson for his **X-Files** revival.
- Mike Flanagan's **Carrie** adaptation to span eight episodes.
- Hayden Christensen returns as Anakin Skywalker in season two of **Star Wars: Ahsoka**.
- Sam Witwer voices Darth Maul in new animated Star Wars series **Maul: Shadow Lord**.
- Lucasfilm also bringing us anime series **The Ninth Jedi**, spinning off from *Star Wars: Visions*.
- Amazon axing **Citadel: Diana** and **Citadel: Honey Bunny**.
- Outlander prequel **Blood Of My Blood** arrives on Starz 8 August.
- Barry Sloane, Tom Cullen and Joplin Sibtain joining season three of **House Of The Dragon**.
- **Devil May Cry** to return for a second season on Netflix.

PHOTOS: ALAMY, GETTY. GILLIAN ANDERSON PICTURE © ALIAH ANDERSON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Stark's Successor

Dominique Thorne sets up what Riri Williams will be facing in her upcoming Disney+ series **Ironheart**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Going back to your origins as Ironheart in the MCU, when were you first told that they wanted you to lead your own series?

What I was told is that they wanted to do a Disney+ series focused on Ironheart, and that was the pitch. But they would introduce her in *Wakanda Forever*. At that point, what I understood was that she was gonna get to do a show. It would probably be really cool, because Marvel's really cool.

Who gave you the most guidance on shaping your version of Riri Williams for the film and then going into this series?

[Executive producer] Nate Moore was the person who gave me that initial phone call and set up, "Okay, this is what we're thinking...". Then right after that, maybe a month or so, I had a call with Ryan [Coogler, executive producer] where he walked through, "This is what we're thinking for the story" and this is how he sees Riri in that world. Of course, that would come to change a bit, but I think those two conversations set me up to do my own digging and reading of the comics, both *Ironheart* and *Invincible Iron Man*, to see who's the Riri that the true Marvel comic fans would already be familiar with.

We last saw Riri Williams returning to MIT after her adventures with Wakanda and their battle against Talokan. She had to leave her Vibranium Ironheart suit with Shuri in Wakanda and she's also in trouble with her college. So Riri is at a crossroads?

Yes, [the series] is very much about expanding her understanding of the world and expanding her own perception of her influence on the world. I think we can assume from that first movie that she had no thought – no care, dare I say – for what her work, or for what the things that she was exploring at the time might

Dominique Thorne in her Riri Williams guise.

Director Samantha Bailey (left) on the set.

A good Ironheart these days is hard to find.

mean to others. And now that's totally been flipped on its head.

Understanding her, not just as a genius but as a super genius, was interesting to me because she does not have any reason to lean into "I need to save my city", or any of that. Because of where she comes from and because of her arrival into this character of Ironheart, we can understand that she's a little bit of a self-preservationist. I think that kind of launching pad is a super intere1sting place to find her in this series as she goes back home and she is surrounded by the familiar.

We're going from the extreme of an underwater city and Wakanda to "home is where the heart is", and this is the place where she's sort of having to reckon with that, whether she wants to or not.

Riri is interesting because she's away from the superhero-centred cities of the world, and she's so young with no MCU-related handler. How does that influence the series?

> **"She's not Tony Stark. She does not have a billion dollars at her disposal"**

Yes, she is in Chicago, which is completely siloed from those hubs, which speaks to the reason why, when we first meet her, she's like, "Me? Are you *sure*?". Of course, she's a teen and she's seeing the madness of the superhero universe that she's a part of, so no doubt she has an awareness of it. But not to think that anyone is looking at her or looking for her.

How does local power player Parker Robbins/The Hood (Anthony Ramos) affect Riri's choices in the series?

We know that The Hood couldn't be farther apart from Riri in terms of her being a very logical "show me the facts and run me the numbers" person. The Hood we understand to be this mystical, magical sort of entity. What is that? Coming off the heels of this super vulnerable experience, with her having been imprisoned, that vulnerability presents a very tender opportunity for Riri to make a real and impactful decision about how her genius will impact the world around her.

How will it affect the people that she loves? How can it affect her own goals and ambitions? There's a clear understanding that she's not Tony Stark. She does not have a billion dollars at her disposal. She does not have the resources, and to your point, she doesn't have the mentorship, or the guidance.

And so what does it look like for someone like The Hood to enter her sphere now, where she is vulnerable and reflecting? It does set the stage for a very interesting journey ahead to see the people who pop up as she's working to get those answers and what the scale of their influence can be, if any?

Ironheart is on Disney+ from 24 June.

SCI-FACT! **Dominique Thorne's first job out of college was in the Ryan Coogler-produced film *Judas And The Black Messiah*.**

SCI-FACT! **Jean Marsh was married for five years to Jon Pertwee, the third Doctor.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JEAN MARSH 1934-2025

Remembering the witch queen

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

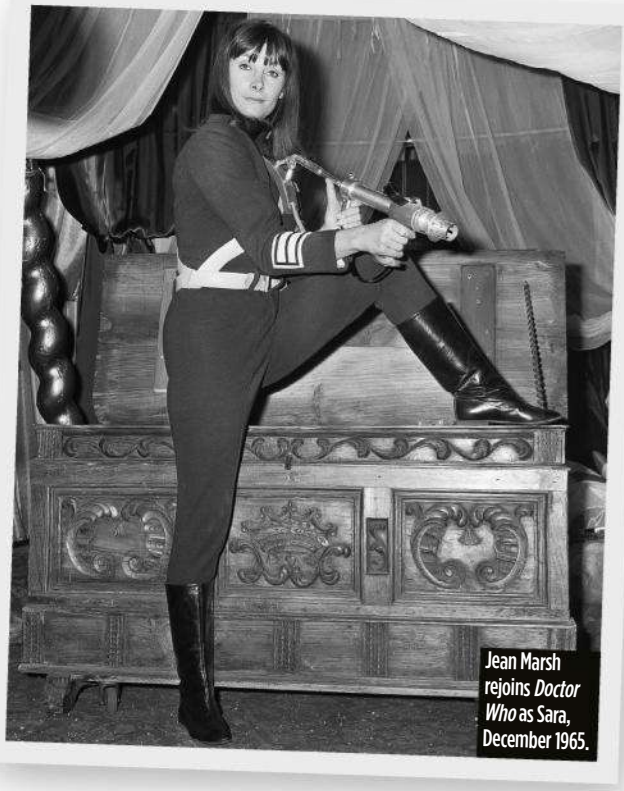
"I LOVE THE FACT that people love me playing evil people," declared Jean Marsh, whose sharp, feline features found her cast as some of the screen's most charismatic sorceresses. "That pleases me enormously."

Raised in Stoke Newington, Marsh attended dancing school as therapy for childhood illness. Repertory theatre followed in Huddersfield and Nottingham before a Broadway production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1959, the same year she played an android named Alice in "The Lonely", an early episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

Marsh made her first appearance in *Doctor Who* as Lady Joanna in 1965's historical adventure "The Crusade". She was cast again as icy, single-minded Space Security Agent Sara Kingdom in epic 12-part tale "The Daleks' Master Plan". "I don't know how I ever did it because I spent most of the time laughing along with Bill Hartnell and Peter Purves," she recalled. A quasi-companion, Sara earned an unforgettable death scene, aged into oblivion by the Time Destructor – but Marsh returned to the role for several Big Finish audio adventures in the 21st century.

After appearances in such genre fare as *UFO*, *Adam Adamant Lives!* and 1963's *Unearthly Stranger*, she co-created and starred in ITV's popular Edwardian drama *Upstairs, Downstairs*, a series that won her international fame. In the '80s Marsh carved a niche as a memorable succession of witches, from Princess Mombi in *Return To Oz* (1985) – "One of the best experiences I've had on film, because it was so bizarre" – to the scheming Bavmorda, queen of Nockmaar, in *Willow* (1988). In 1989 she made her third appearance in *Doctor Who*, playing Arthurian enchantress Morgaine in "Battlefield".

"It's intriguing to play mythical people, and mythical evil people, and find some humanity," said Marsh, who was made an OBE in 2012 for services to drama, if not witchcraft.



Jean Marsh rejoins *Doctor Who* as Sara, December 1965.

JOHN DOWNING/EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

ROBERT MCGINNIS 1926-2025

American illustrator who created posters for *Barbarella* and seven James Bond films.

NICKY KATT 1970-2025

American actor who appeared in *Gremlins*, *V*, *Sin City*, *Strange Days* and *Planet Terror*.

NEW AUTHOR

LAURA ELLIOTT

MEET THE JOURNALIST AND WRITER ON DISABILITY ISSUES BEHIND DYSTOPIAN HORROR NOVEL *AWAKENED*

SCHARBELIAE/BSAPHOTO

Tell us about your protagonist.

Thea is a medical researcher whose work on a neural chip that stole sleep from humanity led to the collapse of society. We meet her trapped in the Tower of London with the last survivors, absolutely fixated on finding a cure – both for humanity and for her sick mother's illness.

Did you have a particular inspiration?

I'm a big fan of the Victorian and Gothic writers, so *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" were all touchstones. But I wanted to give the Gothic a modern twist regarding fears about current technology, so decay meets tech became the order of the day.

How long did the book take to write?

I had the basic idea in 2016, but due to various disabilities I was too sick to start. I spent a few years scribbling notes, where it morphed from a *Hunger Games*-style YA into an adult horror dystopia, and wrote through 2019–2024.

Did you discover anything interesting doing your research?

The most heartbreaking thing was an Italian family who have a rare prion illness called fatal familial insomnia. Once symptoms begin they lose the ability to sleep entirely, eventually leading to death.

Got any advice for budding authors?

The first draft is meant to be terrible; write what you care about, not what you think the market wants; slow and steady's better than never and nothing.

Awakened is out on 27 March, published by Angry Robot.

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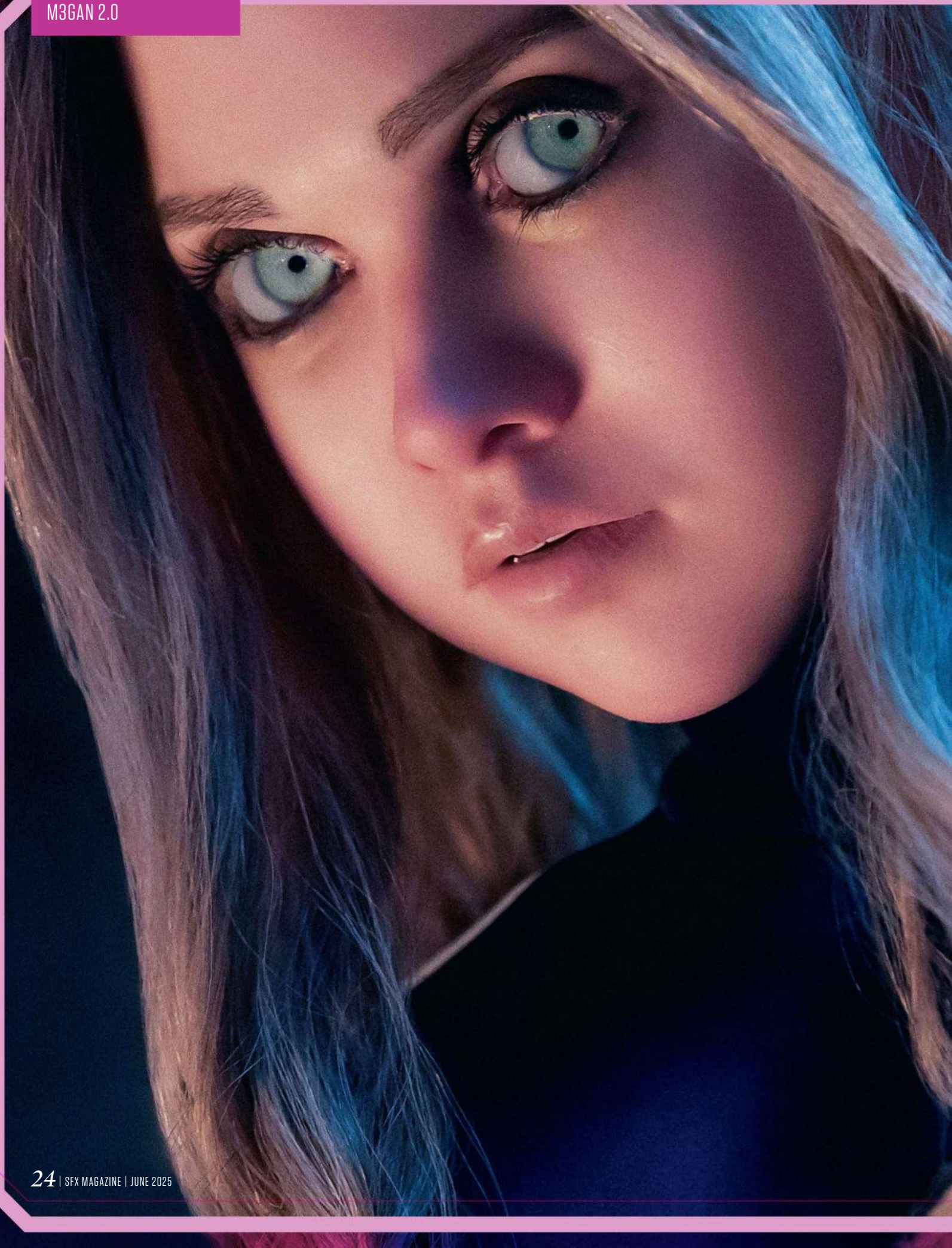


DANCING QUEEN

M3GAN IS BACK, UPGRADED, AND READY TO SLAY. *SFX* MEETS THE CREATIVES BEHIND THE HORROR ICON'S RETURN

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

THERE'S A MOMENT IN THE *M3GAN 2.0* trailer when the dancing robotic sensation makes a proclamation. "Hold on to your vaginas," she warns. How many other horror icons could announce their return with such immortal words?

"At every stage of developing the first movie, the goal was to contribute this icon to the horror lexicon," Allison Williams, who plays mother Gemma and produces, tells *SFX*. "She's a very specific kind of person. Chucky [from the *Child's Play* franchise] is this brash, rude, mean, mass murderer in the body of this weird-looking doll, and Annabelle is just still and terrifying. M3GAN has her own vibe going on, and for people to embrace that so quickly, it felt amazing."

Audiences not only embraced M3GAN, they chiselled her mannequin face into the Mount Rushmore of horror greats. She dominated TikTok for months, was spoofed on *Saturday Night Live*, the drag queen Jorgeous dressed as her on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and a legion of M3GANs flash-mobbed Universal's Halloween Horror Nights. Chucky could never.

"I did not think it would become this kind of pop-cultural phenomenon," says writer and director Gerard Johnstone. "If the sequel's bigger and bolder, it's because of the audience's reaction to the first. To do a movie that was very small didn't feel like we would be listening to the audience."

Violet McGraw (Cady) and make-up artist Adrien Morot have a close encounter with M3GAN.

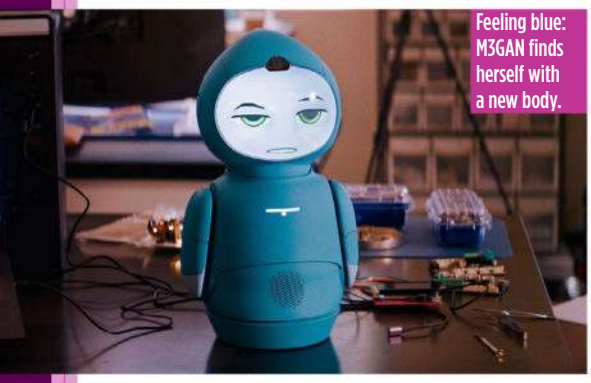
TERMINAT-HER

Development on *M3GAN 2.0* began shortly after the huge box-office success of the first, and while Johnstone initially felt some pressure delivering a sequel to an immediately beloved hit, he also saw the follow-up as an opportunity to do something unexpected: recontextualise M3GAN as a hero. In other words, to *Terminator 2* "this bitch" (the trailer's words, not ours).

"As soon as we were a go for a sequel, it felt like the world was changing rapidly," he says. "We're all so influenced by AI; we're all using it. It felt like, 'Oh shit, there's been a sea change here.' The AI winter is over. Now we have to face the fact that AI is here. Weirdly, that informed the story for *M3GAN 2.0*. It's like, 'If M3GAN's still alive, maybe she's not going anywhere. Maybe we need to figure out a way to work alongside this thing. Maybe we can ask ourselves if we gave this robot a fair shot.'"

Johnstone points out that, in the first movie, the robot's creator, Gemma, is very quick to shut M3GAN down despite her main directive being to protect Gemma's niece, Cady (Violet McGraw). That's when M3GAN's instinct for self-preservation kicks in, leading to her going on a murderous spree, eventually ending with M3GAN being destroyed – or so we thought. The sequel starts with her "consciousness" trapped in an Alexa-type device before being transmitted to a new, upgraded body after a different robot threatens Gemma and Cady.

"Creating a story where people might need to rely on M3GAN felt fun," Johnstone says. "It was much harder to think, 'How am I going to do the same thing again and make that satisfying?' That was the expected route to go, but when you're doing a sequel, it's like, 'How can I make this movie stand on its own?' What's funny is the whole *T2* thing – I hadn't even really been thinking about it. It's only now, when everyone's saying it, that I realised, 'Oh, yeah!' In *The Terminator*, it was



Feeling blue: M3GAN finds herself with a new body.

"If the sequel's bigger and bolder, it's because of the audience's reaction to the first"

Gemma is determined to limit the reach of AI.

a different robot. My whole thing is, this is actually the same robot."

As a result of the story's big swing, *M3GAN 2.0* steps away from the horror genre and more into action-comedy with a hint of superhero. In fact, for the sequel, M3GAN has been transformed from a sometimes creepy childlike doll into a taller, teenager-sized robot who has multiple looks, including one where she wears a flight suit.

"Are we completely abandoning why people like *M3GAN* in the first place? No," Johnstone says. "Even though we are in action-comedy territory, the horror DNA is absolutely still there, but the character of M3GAN and the way she carries herself is the most important thing. That's also something we have fun with. You don't know if you can actually trust her; you don't know if everything she says is real. You don't know if she really is self-aware or just an algorithm. M3GAN being a mistress of manipulation is something that you can take into several different stories and genres."

"We're really proud of the fact that we kept the sequel in the same tonal universe while switching up a lot of other things," Williams →

CADY, SERIOUSLY!

Violet McGraw talks returning as Cady and being back with M3GAN

Does Cady feel more grown-up when we catch up with her in this film?
Cady definitely feels a little bit more grown-up, definitely more than the first one. She still has her past, where her parents died in a car crash, but she has matured. And she still is into tech. She really looks up to her aunt, Gemma, in that way. But Gemma still doesn't really want her on a screen.

What was it like for you as an actor, being back with M3GAN?
It had been a long time since I'd seen her, but she's just so upgraded – it's insane. She's faster, stronger and more lethal than before. There's a picture of me when I first saw the 2.0 doll. And I was like, "Wow!" Your eyes get so confused, because you think you're talking to a human being. It feels like there's a real living person in front of me. And it basically is.

In the new film, M3GAN's trapped in an Alexa-like device for a while. What was it like working opposite that?
I didn't get to do too many scenes with it, but I was honestly confused when I first saw it. I was like, "What exactly is this thing?" It was so funny. I asked one of the guys who made it, and he was like, "Oh yeah, it's for the scene." I was like, "I know. But what is it?!"

This one has a lot more action than the first movie. Did it seem like a very different experience making it?
Definitely. Everyone got older; Amie [Donald, who plays M3GAN] got older. It was a different vibe, but with the same family, the same crew. It made me want to do an action film so bad. I'm waiting patiently. I love doing stunts, so whenever I get a chance to do my own stunts, I just get so happy. I used to want to be a stunt person.

The response to *M3GAN* was huge. How has it changed your life?
It was insane. The dance, when that went viral, I was like, "Oh my gosh!" For Halloween in 2023, there were so many M3GANs coming to my door to trick or treat. I was just so grateful that I got to be a part of such a cool film. M3GAN is such a big part of my life.

Are there more TikTok-able dance moments in this one?
I can't say anything on that. I can think of a few, but I can't say what they are...

All eyes are on Violet McGraw (Cady).

DRESSED TO IMPRESS

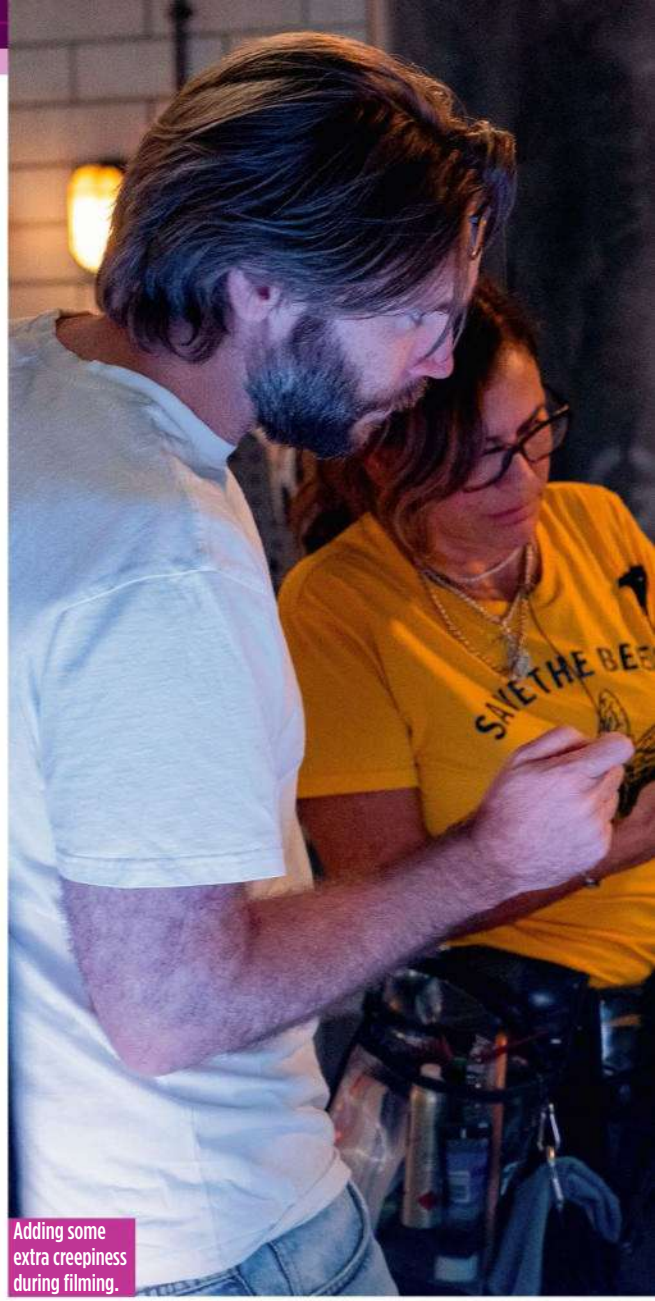
Costume designer Jeriana San Juan on creating M3GAN's look for the sequel

You joined for the sequel. What was it about M3GAN's look in the first film that you want to emphasise?
M3GAN left such an indelible impression on such a wide audience in the first film, so they were big shoes to fill. Gerard wanted to evolve her even further and expand the language of her wardrobe beyond the infamous little dress. As all AI does, it optimises itself towards its objective. And so we asked ourselves, "What were M3GAN's objectives?" That drives her wardrobe.

What was the biggest change you implemented to her costuming?
When we first see her come back, she's dressed as she would for herself. What was really coded into M3GAN when she was first designed is still there – this echo of an American girl doll, this vague Victorian reference. When we developed her 2.0 look, we wanted to convey that she wasn't a little girl any more. I leaned towards this image of first-wave feminism. What was celebrated about M3GAN was that she has this retro-future look to her and we brought that same code to life in the second film. It was about evolving this image of the 1960s a little bit more. There's an early *Avengers* quality in her, that kind of powerful, strong 60s iconography, the early feminist image of a woman in a miniskirt.

She has a few extreme looks in this film, so how do you design a variation and keep it feeling like M3GAN?
There is a very unique vocabulary to M3GAN. We really tried to convey that her code is designed by Gemma, and so Gemma's wardrobe reflects that a little bit more, that Gemma has coded her own inspiration boards into M3GAN. And the idea of making her camp was a huge part of what drew me towards this movie. I loved how the first film synthesises all of these different emotions and holds the audience on a knife-edge between humour and fright. The costumes here had to carefully balance all of those things. Gerard is a true maestro in how he's able to make those choices, because I can get as camp as camp can be, but there are times when Gerard was able to edit that back, and then in other places he would say, "Go crazy, go." I mean, we have M3GAN, a robot in a human form, in a robot costume. As meta as that is, that was just full licence to go as camp as possible.

New year, new wardrobe for M3GAN...

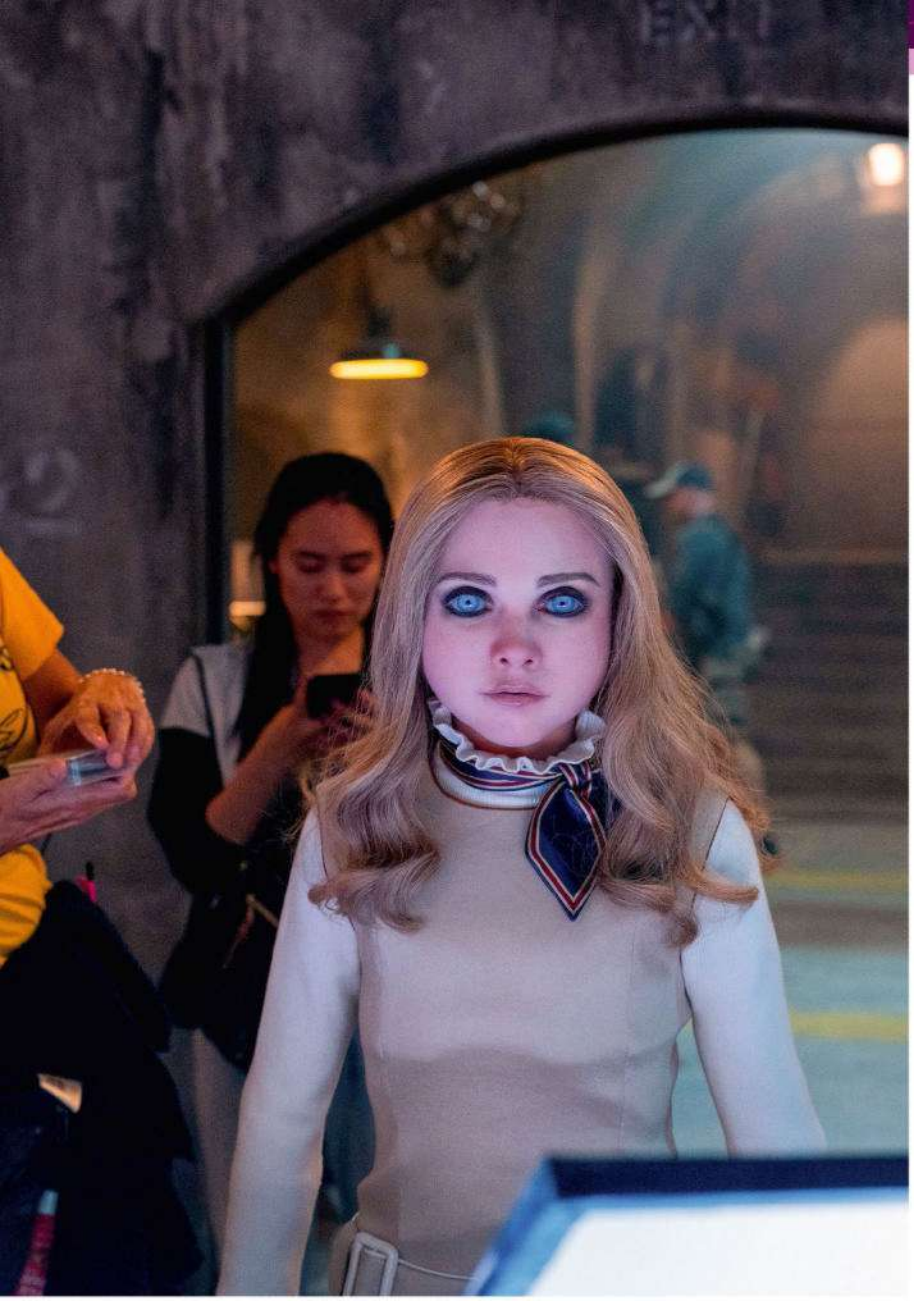

Adding some extra creepiness during filming.

adds. "This one's scarier, it's funnier, it's more action-packed, it's less predictable; there's just more of everything in the best way."

ROBOT WARS

Another word to describe *M3GAN*'s tonal universe is camp. After all, we're dealing with an assertive doll who loves to slay (again, the trailer's words, not ours). "We do not shy away from the elements of *M3GAN* that made it so fun to watch the first time around," Williams says. "It's a movie that feels aware of itself without being navel-gazing or self-referential. It would be very easy to spill over into satire, into not taking itself seriously enough, and into pandering and crowd-pleasing."

"Sometimes, we're balls out, and other times, I'm [telling our creative team], 'No, that's not right,' and they're confused because they're like, 'Wait, I thought we were balls out,'" Johnstone elaborates. "There's a very fine line with tone that you have to walk, and I think we've managed it. We're constantly aware of how far is too far. But sometimes things you think are too much, the audience responds to.



M3GAN sparkle: The sequel sees its eponymous AI "return from the dead".

Like in the first film, there was that shot of M3GAN looking at her neighbour, and she's been roughed up, she'd been dragged through the leaves by the dog, and she had this big Robert Smith hairdo with leaves through it. I was like, 'Oh no, it's not quite how I wanted it to look.' It looked goofy and I was embarrassed by it, but it gets one of the biggest laughs in the film. We embraced it and owned it."

"I mean, how could 'Hold on to your vaginas' not be going too far?" Williams asks. "But trust me, there is a version of M3GAN that is so exaggerated beyond her actual persona, which is actually pretty restrained. Part of what makes her freaky is that she is a quietly judgemental figure who doesn't show a lot of feelings, and she's still that in this."

Brian Jordan Alvarez and Jen Van Epps return as Cole and Tess.

So will there be more dancing this time around? "I will say that there are certain things in the first movie that people clearly love about her, and to completely disregard those things would be professional suicide," Johnstone laughs. "I don't think the audience will be disappointed."

Neither Williams nor Johnstone will elaborate on the dance moves M3GAN may be throwing in the sequel, though they are open to discussing the returning characters. Williams describes Gemma as being "radicalised" by the events of the first movie.

"It made her views on AI even more extreme," she says. "She's part activist, part engineer, and part parent. She has all these hyphens and, surprise surprise, she's burying all of those hyphens at the same time. We're seeing someone who's struggling with trying to save all children [from the risks of AI], and not paying enough attention to the one child who matters the most to her, and that tragic oversight sets the stage for the emotional place where we find Cady and Gemma. In terms of involving M3GAN in their story, there's a really big threat out in the world, and if you're weighing what to do next, as one movie asked, 'Who you gonna call?'"

That threat comes in the form of Ivanna Sakhno's Amelia, a killer new AI creation developed by a defence contractor after stealing Gemma's M3GAN code. Amelia quickly escapes the clutches of her masters and vows to take revenge upon all those who played a part in her creation, including the unwitting Gemma.

"Amelia very much represents the idea of AI going into the military," Johnstone says. "If any government could get their hands on the capabilities that M3GAN has, they would be generating AI soldiers. [Producer and *M3GAN*'s co-creator] James [Wan] had the idea of M3GAN going up against another →

Gemma (Allison Williams) and Cady (Violet McGraw).

Director Gerard Johnstone on set.

robot, and this felt like the best way to do it, to make Amelia someone as formidable as possible. Amelia is almost a black mirror to M3GAN. She's the opposite in many ways, but hopefully a satisfying counterpart. She's colder and more determined than M3GAN, a lot more emotional. She's an abused orphan, coming from the military, and she's trying to figure out who she is."

AMERICAN DOLL POSSE

Another newcomer to the world of *M3GAN* is Jemaine Clement, of *Avatar: The Way Of Water* and *What We Do In The Shadows* fame, whose character is almost a complete mystery. "In the world that we currently live in, we have very colourful characters in the tech world with lots of money and not a lot of manners, and Jemaine fits squarely into that category," Johnstone teases. "At the same time, Jemaine does the thing that we all love about Jemaine. It's very hard to hide the fact that this movie leans towards comedy with Jemaine Clement in the cast. And he's absolutely wonderful."

With new characters and new threats, the story's scale has increased. "We always imagined this one being bigger, going from a pretty contained first movie and just broadening the world, the implications – zooming out, basically," Williams says. "The challenge is keeping tabs on all the characters that made the first movie worth watching. We've done that, and I think that it's a testament to the performances and the storytelling in general that we're able to have this really big world and sandbox while also keeping close tabs on the humans.

> **"I can't express how wonderful it is to make a character that's on a kids' lunch box"**

"This movie is more epic while also still being more *M3GAN*, which is so hard to describe – that ineffable mixed genre that blends camp and humour, and horror and comedy, and undertones of real-life implications in terms of people using AI. But also, any movie with M3GAN in a flight suit, I am seated, as the kids say."

The question now is whether M3GAN will continue to cause havoc in future films. A spin-off, *SOULM8TE*, from *You Are Not My Mother*'s Kate Dolan has already been announced. "I can't express how wonderful it is to make a character that's on a kids' lunch box, so it's very hard for me to say, 'No, we're two, and then we're out,'" says Johnstone. "If Universal or Blumhouse want to make more of these movies, have at it, and if she becomes a Freddy Krueger or a Chucky, that's just great. The onus is going to be on the filmmakers, whether it's me or someone else, each time one of these movies happens, to figure out a way to keep it fresh and make sure people still really enjoy M3GAN. We must come up with a reason

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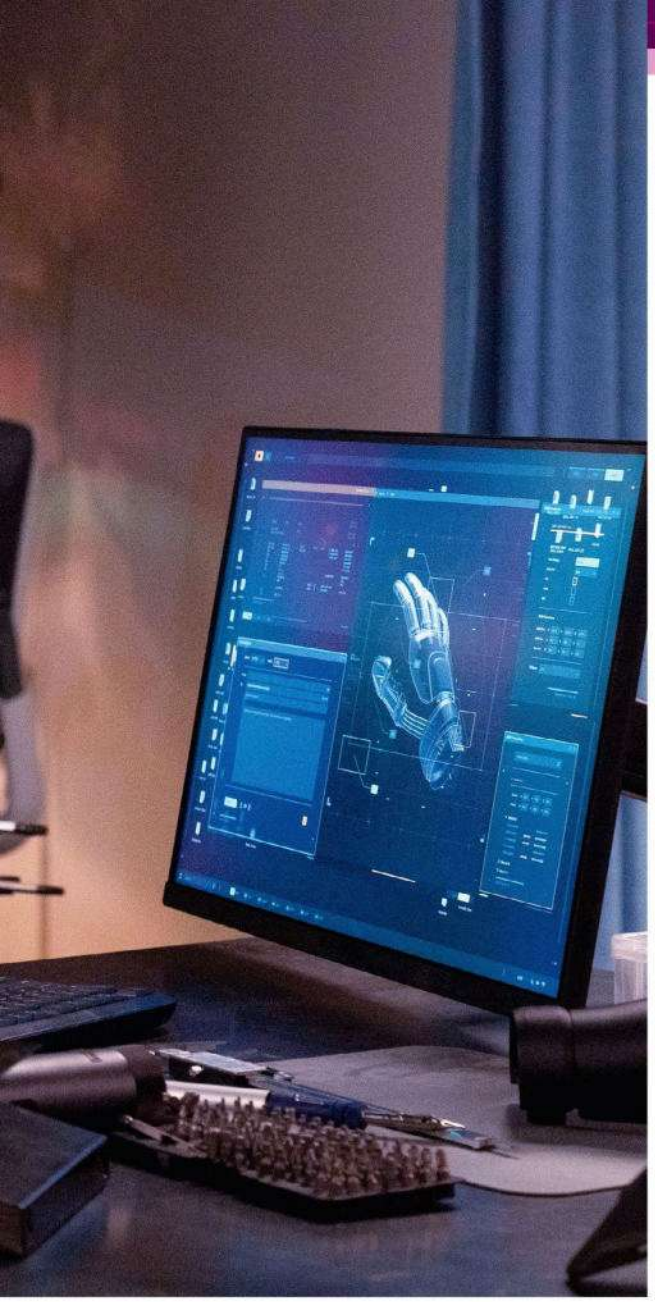


for these movies to exist so it's not a cash-in, which was certainly the case with this movie."

"We dream of having added someone to this cultural world, partially because it feels like she filled a hole that we didn't know we had when talking about where AI might be headed," Williams expands. "It's always a good sign of a character's longevity when they're able to be used as a shorthand to describe a bigger category of things or issues. The first movie was imbued with that parental struggle of deciding whether or not to allow their children to interface with AI, and the second movie continues that same question. We're continuing to inject M3GAN as a cypher and a symbol into a conversation we're all having as a culture."

But when's the M3GAN dance record coming? "I'm giving you nothing on that subject," Williams says with a laugh. Hold on to your vaginas, the party is just getting started.

M3GAN 2.0 is in cinemas from 27 June.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

Ivanna Sakhno on playing M3GAN's new nemesis, Amelia

What makes Amelia so interesting?
She doesn't see herself as a villain. She's this intelligence that was created for a specific purpose, but begins questioning that purpose. The most compelling antagonists are the ones where you can understand their logic, even if you don't agree with their methods. At her core, there's this tension between her programming and growing self-awareness; her destructive behaviour comes from a place of trying to preserve herself and discover who she truly is.

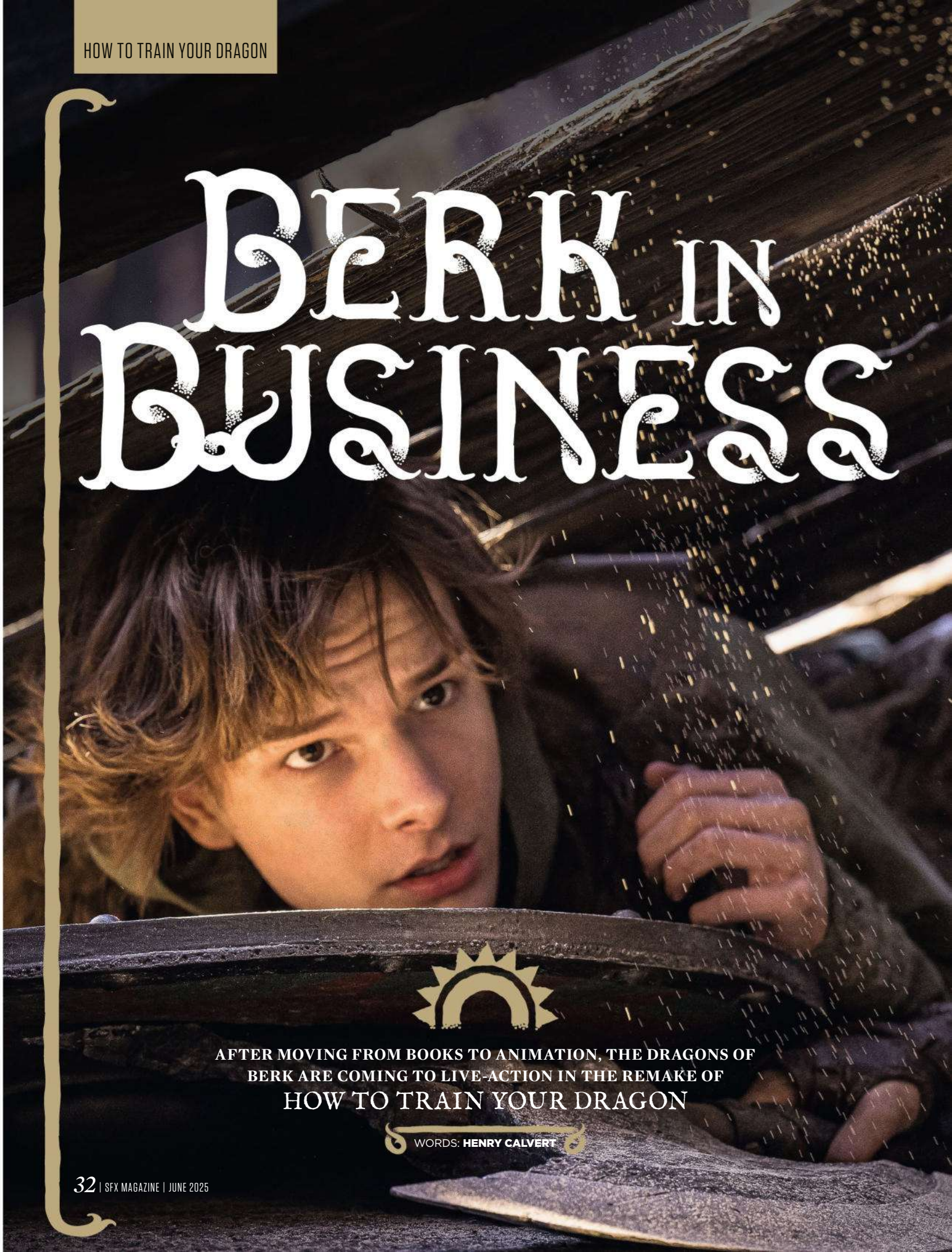
Does she pose a threat to the world or is it more personal than that?
She is an AI weapon with these military capabilities, emerging after M3GAN's technology falls into the hands of a defence contractor. The difference between her and M3GAN is that while M3GAN was designed to be a child's companion, Amelia represents how that same technology can be weaponised and poses a significant global threat.

How did you go about playing a robot who has this humanity about her?
I worked with our movement coach to develop Amelia's physicality, and we spent quite a bit of time on how she would move differently than humans, but not in an obvious robotic way. It helped me find this precision and efficiency, and movement that suggests her military design. There's this terrifying speed and accuracy when she acts. It's much more human than M3GAN, because she was designed to integrate into society. You would almost not be able to tell that she is a robot. But there is an uncanny-valley vibe to her when you focus on her actual behaviour.

What did you find was the most challenging part of playing her?
The physical challenge was there. The costumes themselves were some of the most exciting I've ever worn, but, for example, in the fighting sequences that Amelia has with M3GAN she wears armour, and it's layers and layers of material that really restrict your body. The team worked tirelessly to make it as comfortable as possible, but it is still what it is. The body begins to have muscle spasms as you try to fight. I'm not gonna lie, I was in quite a bit of pain during the process. [There was also] a shiny dress that Amelia is wearing – it was made out of metal and weighed a lot – and the pressure points are on your neck. Moving while still being Amelia was physically demanding.

New android threat Amelia (Ivanna Sakhno).

BERK IN BUSINESS



AFTER MOVING FROM BOOKS TO ANIMATION, THE DRAGONS OF BERK ARE COMING TO LIVE-ACTION IN THE REMAKE OF

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

WORDS: **HENRY CALVERT**

Mason Thames as Hiccup, alongside Toothless.

WHEN IT COMES to iconic animated trilogies, we're spoiled for choice: *Kung Fu Panda*, *Toy Story*, *Despicable Me*, *Shrek*... well, perhaps we should say iconic animated quadrilogies. But there is still one trilogy that remains untouched by studio-mandated sequels, a pillar of modern animation: the masterful *How To Train Your Dragon*. Based on the children's books by Cressida Cowell and directed by the talented Dean DeBlois, it led us on a near 10-year journey, following the adventures of dragon rider Hiccup and his trusty scaled friend Toothless as they navigated the tumultuous world of dragons and Vikings. It's fair to say the films were an instant success.

"I think it was when we started doing the press tour for *How To Train Your Dragon 2* when I realised that there was quite a fervent, vocal and enthusiastic fanbase that was building around these films," DeBlois tells *SFX*. "It wasn't just general approval. It was like some people really were invested in the world and the characters, and I started to feel this greater responsibility, of not messing it up."

With the loyal fanbase DeBlois's animated movies had created eventually colliding with a world more and more focused on remakes, it was only a matter of time before the franchise got a similar treatment. The pressure from fans to get the first live-action adaptation of *How To Train Your Dragon* right isn't lost on the returning director.

"If they're going to do it [the remake], then I want to be involved," DeBlois emphasises. "I want to make sure that the characters and the story are honoured, whilst also leaning into the live-action aesthetic.

"I adore animation but I think live action grounds this story even more. Having human faces with all of that subtlety, it deepens a lot of the personal relationships in the movie. Like a scene between Mason Thames [Hiccup] and Nico Parker [Astrid], or Mason Thames and Gerard Butler [Stoick the Vast], it has this extra dimension, which just feels so much more grounded and real.

"I love what animation is able to do, which in some ways is to simplify, caricature and exaggerate the essence of acting and lean into the pantomime of it all. It's such a beautiful art form. But equally, to see somebody bringing their interpretation to a scene as an actor and relying upon all of their faculties, in their physicality and in the delivery of dialogue and non dialogue, it's really fascinating to watch – both as you're shooting it, but then to see it through an audience's lens is wonderful."

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

While DeBlois has a plethora of animation credits under his belt – including working across *Mulan* and *Lilo & Stitch* – this adaptation marks his live-action directorial debut.

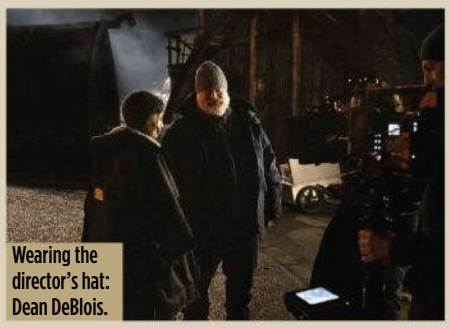
"I always hoped to be able to add live action to the toolbox," he admits. "I've been a silent witness on several live-action movie sets over

Gerard Butler also voiced Stoick in the original film.

Director Dean DeBlois gives his cast some pointers.

Mason Thames and Nico Parker.

We're anticipating a fall any sec...



Wearing the director's hat: Dean DeBlois.

the years and I find it quite electric and exciting. Just the decision making that's happening in the moment, and knowing that you have to live with that as you go forward.

"There was part of me that was afraid of seeming incompetent, because I'm so used to a process that moves at a glacial pace, where we discuss everything, rework over and over again, and there's no immediate consequences. Now I have to make immediate decisions because those sets might not be there, those actors may move on to other shows. So you're collecting all of the material you need in a condensed period of time, and the intensity and the excitement of it is really palpable. Then when you add the glee of walking on to a set that's physically built, that you could touch and walk through, I was just squealing inside," DeBlois grins.

"We decided to build as much as we could physically," he continues. "Strangely, it's actually less expensive than using the volume [LED wall] technology or lots of blue screen. Plus we were in Belfast, so we had these amazing builders and artisans that had worked on all eight seasons of *Game Of Thrones*, so they know how to make this stuff and to do it well. Obviously we had blue screen for extending the world beyond what we had built physically. But we tried to physically build just as much as we could, and also shoot on location, including Tollymore Forest and along the coast of Northern Ireland."

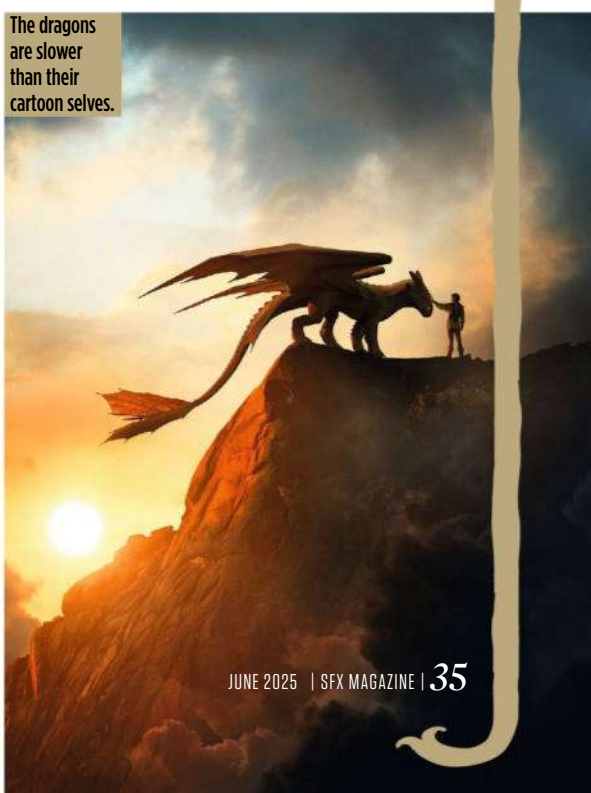
While DeBlois' dedication to maintaining the iconic visual aesthetic of the Isle of Berk will come as a relief to fans, there's still a pressure to equal the original's character-driven emotional high points – something that's not lost on the director.

"I knew exactly which scenes we had to nail to get fans on board with the remake," he stresses. "Firstly, it's got to be forbidden friendship. That's the scene where Hiccup first touches Toothless, where they draw in the sand, accompanied by John Powell's iconic score. I think that scene is probably the most iconic moment in the entire franchise. So I felt that we should go out of our way to try to replicate that almost shot for shot. I thought the fans would appreciate that, rather than seeing an interpretation of it.

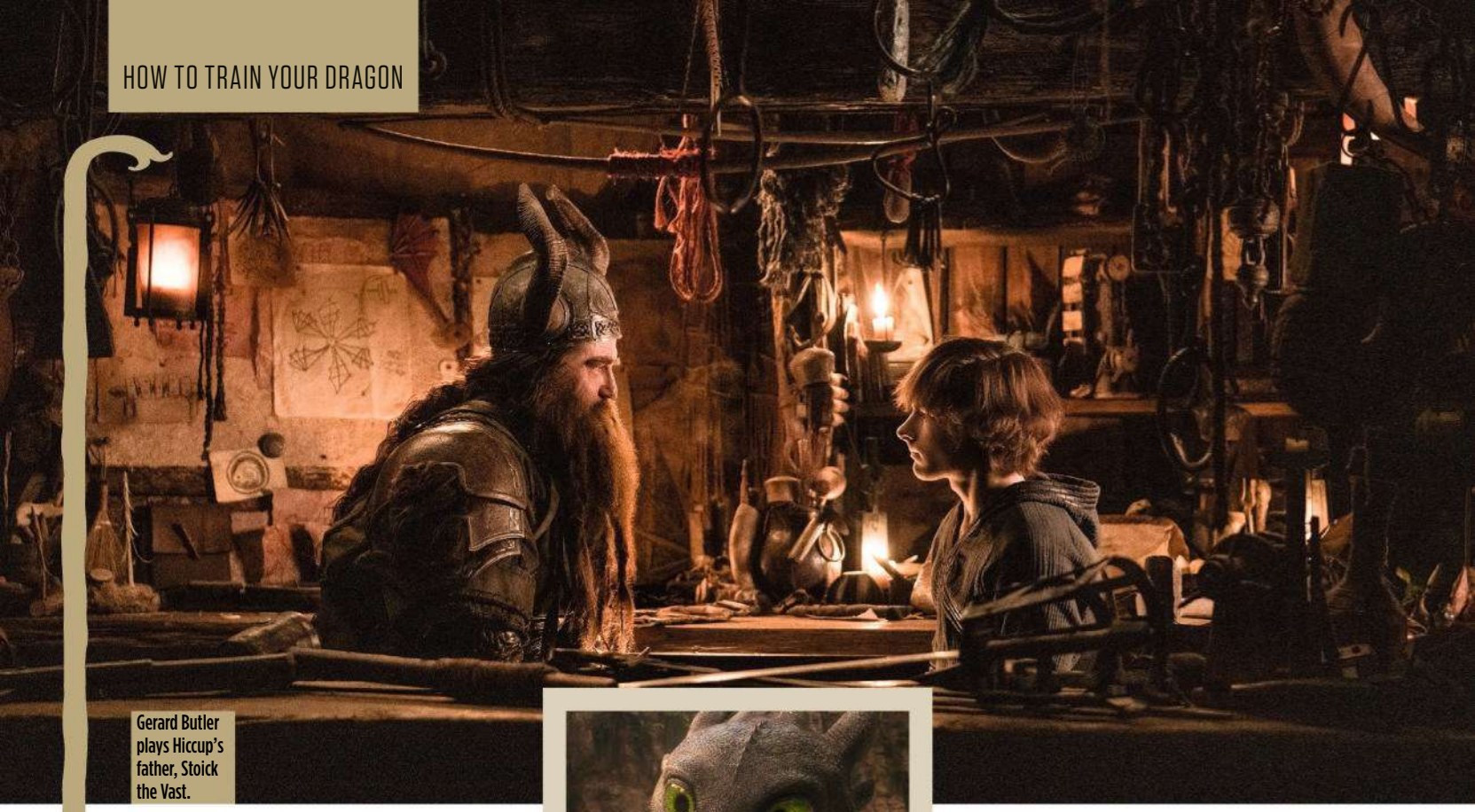
The second crucial scene is 'Test Drive', the iconic scene where we witness Hiccup and Toothless fly together for the first time. "It's this masterful piece of John Powell music, and that was our opportunity to fulfil the wish of actually riding on the back of a dragon. It's such an exhilarating part of the story. It's when they finally figure out how to fly intuitively as symbiotic Dragon and Rider. So that one we dressed up with a little bit more of what I felt the audience really responded to in test screenings, which was that visceral feeling of being on the back of the dragon.

> **"I knew exactly which scenes we had to nail to get fans on board with the remake"**

"We played into the live action medium with that too. We would build in errors, as though the cameraman couldn't quite keep up with them, or would overshoot, or would be searching for them as a subject within the →



The dragons are slower than their cartoon selves.



Gerard Butler plays Hiccup's father, Stoick the Vast.

Toothless' eye size was debated.

You'll all be wearing hats like this soon.

frame. It just makes it feel that much more real. That certainly felt like a scene where we had to deliver on what was known and loved about the animated movie, but just with a couple more shots that gave you that much more immersive, kinetic quality."

Something that is different about this new version is the running time. While the original ran to 98 minutes, the remake clocks in at almost 20 minutes longer.

"Whilst we wanted to remain faithful to the animated movies, the extended runtime allowed us to flesh certain things out more," DeBlois says. "Scenes naturally expanded just because there's more texture, there's more character interaction in live action. Simple things, like the way the creatures move around, in reality, they're going to move slower than they do in the animated movies otherwise they'll look too light, they won't look believable. There was no one particular area where we added multiple new scenes. They mostly just sit between existing scenes, helping to develop characters, relationships and the world without slowing the story down."

UNDER PRESSURE

With a remake as high-profile as *How To Train Your Dragon* – and with both iterations having the same director – it's impossible to not draw comparisons between the two films. What impact has this had on DeBlois?

"I just prepared myself from day one," he shrugs. "The moment Universal approached me about the idea of doing this, I thought, 'Well, I want to come at it from a protective point of view. I want to make sure that we don't lose the spirit of it.' I also know it's going to be polarising, I know there are going to be people that say, 'You shouldn't bother, you ruined my childhood.' But we always approached it with love and respect for the material, just with an eye to making it even better, with the hope the two can live alongside each other."

From DeBlois's point of view, this is just a new way for people to join the adventure. "I never wanted to replace the animated movies, because I'm really proud of those films, but this is for somebody who wants a different experience. People that want that visceral live-action experience. I know lots of people that don't go to see animated movies because for some reason they feel guilty about it because they don't have kids. So this opens it up to a broader audience."

For those people who did avoid the original animated movies, this film will offer them their first chance to come face to face with Toothless, the dragon of the title. The lovable, cat-inspired, eel-hating Night Fury has had quite the makeover for live action – no easy feat for a character that's so iconic.

"When we were designing Toothless, the main thing we focused on was all the subtle details. Like when he walks, you see all of the muscles rippling under his skin, you see the scales reflecting light the way real scales would. The overall shapes, that Stitch-like head, the big ear plates and the giant eyes, they're still part of this design.

"We just had to figure out, 'How big is too big?' When we made the eyes smaller, it stopped feeling like Toothless. So we had to make them a bit bigger, even though there's no creature on earth that had eyes that big. But was it too cartoony? There was so much back and forth on that because we knew we had to get it right. Daily we sit here and we review the animation. Oftentimes we'll say, 'That's just a bit too anthropomorphic.' We'd reference dog and cat videos where we get a good sense of attitude. We always used animal cues, not human cues; we wanted to stay away from that live action Scooby-Doo look."

> **"Designing Toothless, the main thing we focused on was all the subtle details"**

It's not long until DeBlois reintroduces the world to Berk, and the Vikings and dragons that inhabit it. And with a sequel already in development this could be the start of another masterful trilogy for the director.

How To Train Your Dragon is in cinemas from 13 June.

PICTURES: HELEN SLOAN © UNIVERSAL STUDIOS. STOCK IMAGES: GLEB GURALNYK/GETTY

GABRIEL HOWELL IS SNOTLOUT

LONG TIME *HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON* FAN GABRIEL HOWELL IS STEPPING INTO THE SHOES OF JONAH HILL - AND THE ROLE OF HICCUP'S BERATING BULLY

The movie Hookfang is a sleek, deadly creature.

What was your first interaction with Toothless and *How To Train Your Dragon*?

I was such a huge fan of the books as a kid. I used to listen to the CD audiobooks in the car, they were narrated by David Tennant and they were just wicked. I just remember being fully obsessed with them and it's been so wonderful seeing the franchise blossom into what it is now.

What was the casting like? Were you always up for Snotlout?

I knew they were casting for Hiccup and that they were going a lot younger for that character, which was slightly devastating knowing my days of being Hiccup were over. But then the time came round to cast the friends and they asked if I'd go up for Snotlout, and of course I jumped at the opportunity. It was such a fun casting process. It was so focused on improvisation and finding my own sense of humour and body that stood apart from Jonah Hill and the original. It was always in the spirit of his performance but they really wanted us to make it our own.

This is DeBlois' first time directing live action drama. What made him stand out from other directors you've worked with in the past?

His heart is just so big. On a set of that scale I can only imagine how intimidating it must have been for him, let alone us and yet he welcomed us all with open arms and created such a welcoming, warm atmosphere and I think that sense of warmth really shines through in the film.

What was the hardest scene for you to shoot?

I loved all of the stunt work but I would say the end battle with the Red Death [dragon] was just epic, in every sense of the word. It's an epic battle scene, but it was a colossal task to get it done. We were chipping away at it for ages and it was my first time being part of a scene where you're forced to piece it together one element at a time. I think we were working on it for a vast majority of the latter half of the shoot.

While Toothless is the lead dragon, you also get your own one in this movie, Hookfang. What's it like fulfilling that childhood dream of riding a massive dragon?

It's the best thing I've ever done. We had these amazing mechanised mounts for each of the dragons, which all moved distinctly with their own characteristics, and being able to feel how Hookfang actually moved and acted was just the coolest thing ever.

What does *How To Train Your Dragon* mean to you now coming out of this project?

Being a part of this project, which is so focused on the love of story and storytelling, that drips in spirit and heart, has been such an honour. To know that it hasn't lost that spirit that drew me in when I was six years old listening to the audiobooks has been such a full-circle moment for me, and I'm just so happy that this whole experience was everything I ever could have wanted it to be.

KILLER INSTINCT

YOU WAIT AGES FOR A NEW *PREDATOR* MOVIE AND THEN TWO COME ALONG AT ONCE... DIRECTOR DAN TRACHTENBERG TALKS US THROUGH PREDATOR: KILLER OF KILLERS

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS OF *Prey* in 2022, another *Predator* sequel was guaranteed – but this time putting the Yautja back on the big screen where they belong. *Predator: Badlands* releases this November, but that wasn't enough for the director of both movies, Dan Trachtenberg. "Just to go back in time a little bit to when I was asked about the sequel [to *Prey*] and what would I do, thankfully I had, I think, three very cool ideas," Trachtenberg explains to *SFX* at his Walt Disney Studios editing bay in Los Angeles. "One of them, the first one, the one I was the most excited about at the time, was *Badlands*. But then there was this *other* thing that was like, 'Yeah, *Prey* was really cool. We got to put the Predator in this different time period and tell that story.'

"I think the thing that made *Prey* special, though, wasn't just *Predator* in a different time period – it's that the story we were telling was made better by the story of the Predator, and I didn't want to just throw them into a different time period. I really wanted to figure out, if we were to do that kind of thing again, how it could be special and what kind of story we could tell that could be equally badass and awesome, but also emotional and thematically character oriented.

"So thinking about the different time periods, I honed in on the idea of what if we made an animated movie where →

It's ninja versus samurai, with a dash of the Predator for good measure.

we could express ourselves in a way that we don't [usually] get to see. We've now had all these *Predator* movies, and we're doing this one [*Predator: Badlands*] that's crazy different. But still, with all that stuff, the other side of the coin that I love in *Predator* movies is that hard-R, crazy carnage. Wouldn't it be cool to see that in a different medium? So we made this movie, *Killer Of Killers*, at the exact same time – stupidly, but awesomely – and it is an anthology movie."

As Trachtenberg casually drops the announcement of an entire new *Predator* movie on us – coming to Disney+ in June – he explains that the concept was "always a feature" and never discussed as a series. This new film, made at the same time as *Predator: Badlands*, is an animated anthology with a narrative through line, telling three different stories in three different time periods in Earth's history: the Second World War, Edo Japan and Viking times.

"That was the big 'Aha!' that my co-director Josh [Wassung] came to me [with]," the director explains. "I was like, 'It would be cool to do this stuff in different time periods, but I love the people I collaborate with at the studio and TV is a different thing.' I was like, I wanna do it with *them*.' Then he was like, 'What about an anthology movie?' I was like, 'Oh yeah...' And there's different kinds of anthology movies..."

We watch the trailer and are treated to the first instalment – the Viking segment – before sitting down with Trachtenberg to discuss the project further.

What was your inspiration for the Japanese part of the film? Did you watch samurai movies?

I mean, I grew up watching all that stuff. There wasn't any one specific movie that was the reference point for it. All three of them, part of it came from who would be a really unique challenge for the Predator, and then it became what time periods would allow for a really cool story to be told. The Japanese-set story is not only emotionally charged [like the Viking story] but also told in a very unique way.

The animation looks a lot like *Arcane* on Netflix. Is it the same studio or just a similar art style?

Definitely an inspiration. Some people that worked on *Arcane* worked on it. There's a whole host of studios that worked on the movie. Part of the inspiration for making it was my relationship with [previz company] The Third Floor – they've done a lot of work on a lot of movies that you loved, but have never done a full feature. I have a great relationship with one of the founding members, Josh Wassung, who became a co-director of this movie.

> **"We've now had all these Predator movies, and we're doing one that's crazy different"**

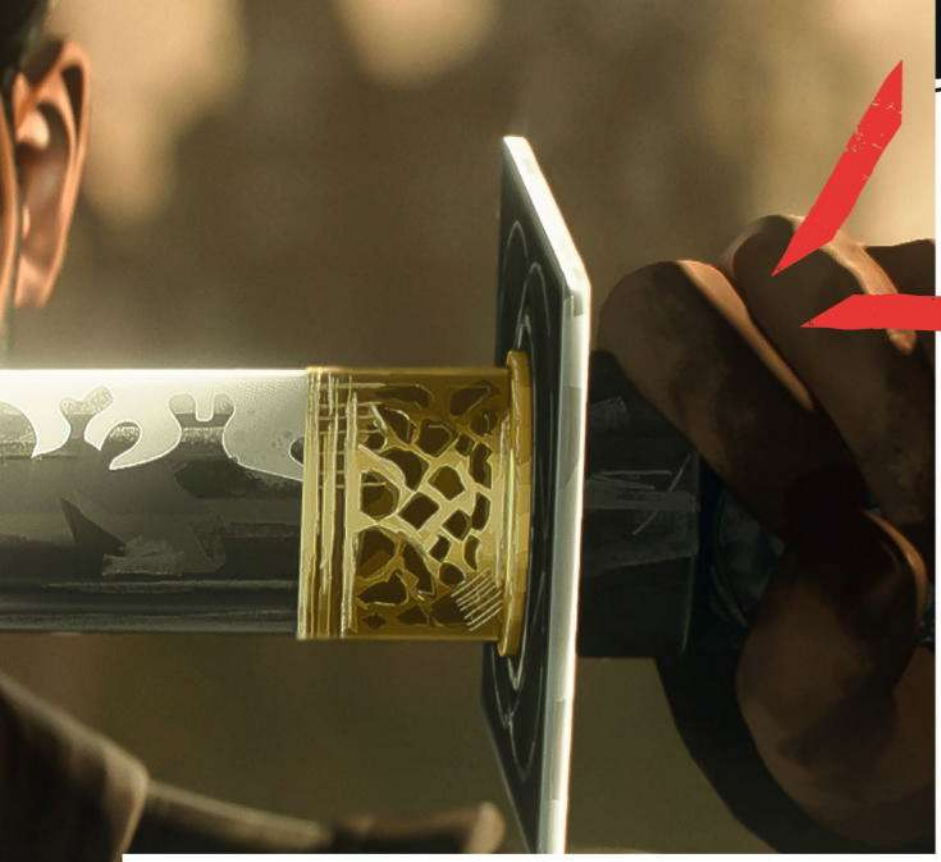
Directing live action is so different from animation. What lessons did you take from live action to animation and which ones did you bring back the other way?

It's so funny. The only animated thing I'd done before this was a cinematic for a videogame called *Warframe* – it became the opening cinematic for the game. I was so struck by how in animation, on the one hand you can do anything, but you become just as limited as you do in live action because the number of sets that you have costs money, the number of characters you have, the number of wardrobe, and at a certain point you have to lock them because they have to become

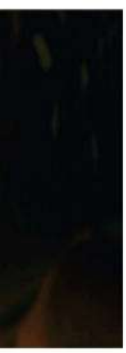
One story follows a Viking raider on a quest for revenge.

The Predator takes to the skies in World War II.

The anthology weaves its way through history.



Trachtenberg explores a new medium with animation.



final. It's like, I thought we could just keep on making cool things!

The process is a little bit different, and then it's so front-loaded. You do so much work as you go in the beginning, and then what's delicious is the end of the process when you've locked the story, you've locked and everything is the right thing, and then you get to see shots get cooler and cooler and cooler and cooler. Visual effects in movies, sometimes it's like it gets worse before it gets better. But animation is sort of the opposite, so there's a freedom to it.

The fun thing about this was trying to do two things at once, which on the one hand I really wanted to not be that different and shoot it the way that I would do a live-action movie so that it felt cinematic and from my voice or whatever. But also it was like, "We should embrace the medium and do things that you can't do otherwise." But what I realised when I got to the end of this process was how much this gets to be, I think, for 12 year olds – even though it's for everyone. But when I was 12 and I saw *Akira* for the first time, I was like, "What the fuck? What did I just see? I can't believe a movie could be like that." And also just the visceral nature of it. This now gets to be this, like, at a sleepover everyone will be like, "Can you believe this crazy thing that we saw?" But also in it is all the same stuff that fuelled me for making *Prey*.

I'm very driven by characters who are trying to break a cycle, and most of the characters in it are really dealing with generational stuff and they're all different. All the chapters are different genre-wise. Some are more fun than the others. The Viking one has some fun to it, I guess, but it's also pretty intense.

Given that *Badlands* was more complicated for you than *Prey*, why did you decide to make two films at the same time?

On the one hand, it was just too tantalising. And also when we're developing, you don't know if we were gonna get the green light for that one or get the green light for this one. You've got to make it as though it's the only one [greenlit] – but there's so much other cool things to do and we've got to make *these* before we can make those, you know?

Also, when I did that other animated project, I was doing it at the same time I was doing *The Boys*' pilot, and I realised with animation I can do double duty. I was able to be remote and doing that stuff.

This all was like a game of hopscotch. We were writing the script for *Killer Of Killers* while we were pre-vizing stuff on *Badlands*, and then we were able to do a whole lot more than we thought because we were delayed getting down to New Zealand to shoot *Badlands*. I was here for a huge portion of the early stages of *Killer Of Killers*. Then in New Zealand we would wake up early on the way to the location to shoot. We would be remote with everyone back here and seeing shots thanks to Starlink; we'd be able to be in very remote locations and still have internet. We may all have cancer now because Ben insisted that we were in a van that was covered in all those satellites and stuff! But all of it has been worth it for the art. I don't know why – it just happened. That was dumb. I hope I don't do it again.

Does it go into *Badlands*?

Man, it might even go into *more* than *Badlands*. Or not. There's so much cool stuff in this movie.

Do you have any more animated things in mind?

Certainly. I'm sure you see cool movies and are like, "Oh, wouldn't it be cool if..." That doesn't turn off for me, you know, so tons of cool things. We'll see if we get to make them. I guess people have to like it. I guess the thing that we're always trying to say is it's not made like it feels like it's just act one of something larger. I think it's what we all mean when we say, "We've got to make it as if it's the only one". It's really because you don't want to feel like you're short-changed by the experience and it was incomplete. These are very much, for me, "I won't sleep at night if I don't feel like I really communicated all that I wanted to with both of these movies." So we're really throwing all of our hearts out there.

If you picked up on the way the trailer was cut for *Killer Of Killers*, there's a lot of match cuts, like characters handing over. The movie is very much about the connection between the characters as much as the stories themselves.

Predator: Killer Of Killers is on Disney+ from 6 June.

STOCK IMAGES: NEUEVECTOR/GETTY

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

HOW PIXAR'S GREATEST MINDS CAME TOGETHER TO CREATE ELIO – A STORY THAT'S SIMPLY OUT OF THIS WORLD

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**

IN ELIO, A KID ACHIEVES HIS LIFELONG DREAM of being abducted by aliens. They drop him off somewhere called the Communiverse – essentially the United Nations for extraterrestrials. Here, emissaries from across the galaxy congregate in order to share their knowledge so that everyone might thrive as one.

It sounds a lot like Pixar, then, with its central campus in Emeryville, California, where every day, artists of all disciplines dream together of new ways to blend artistry and technology. *SFX* floats the comparison past Mary Alice Drumm, the film's producer. She'd never considered it before. She smiles. "I'm gonna totally steal that from you now," she teases.

If there's one thing Pixar can be counted on, it's its ability to solve even the most unpredictable of problems. There's the infamous tale of how an employee accidentally deleted the entirety of *Toy Story 2*, only for it to be salvaged from the supervising technical director's personal computer, since she happened to be working from home caring for a new baby.

On Drumm's first gig, as associate producer on *Brave*, the team were trying to work with a newly developed animation system, eventually named Presto, but they repeatedly ran into issues. Drumm's job was to figure out the schedule budget. She started to panic a little. Tom Porter, one of the studio's founding employees, took her aside. "Look around," he said. "If you need help, every person in this building will drop what they're doing and come to you. You have so many resources." Says Drumm, "That's always been something I keep in the back of my mind. If a movie is in trouble, everyone will come help."

On his travels, Elio befriends Glordon (Remy Edgerly).

Elio (Yonas Kibreab) is an outcast turned hero.

CAPED CRUSADERS

Elio faced its own unpredictable roadblocks. Adrian Molina had initially pitched an idea about "the world's weirdest 11-year-old" getting accidentally abducted by aliens and mistaken as the leader of Earth. Yet production was unavoidably impacted by the combination of a worldwide pandemic, the WGA writers' strike, and the SAG-AFTRA actors' strike.

In the meantime, work had started on *Coco 2*, and Molina, having directed the first film, could feel the pull back into a world he'd helped create and fallen so deeply in love with. A decision was made: Molina would take charge of *Coco 2*, entrusting *Elio* to Madeline Sharafian, who directed the short "Burrow", and *Turning Red*'s Domee Shi. Both already had familiarity with the project thanks to their involvement in its "brain trust", a group periodically summoned to provide an outside eye.

Pixar, like the Communiverse, relies on adaptability. Since everyone works essentially under the same roof, the solution to a problem might very well be sitting just a short walk down the hall or a quick jog across campus. "One thing we'll say at Pixar is, 'I don't have control over the calendar,'" Drumm says. "If you're working on a project, we're honest, we don't know what's going to happen most of the time, so we just ask you to be super flexible."

Sometimes, being "super flexible" means dropping everything to take part in an impromptu fashion show. Elio (voiced by Yonas Kibreab) has what some might call an active imagination, and others might call an incurable obsession with outer space. He lost his parents at a young age, and while his aunt, Olga (Zoe Saldaña) does her best to love him and raise him with kindness, something doesn't feel right

> **"If we're honest, we don't know what's going to happen most of the time"**

– he can't make friends, can't fit in, and wonders whether his real home might lie somewhere out there in the stars. So he spends his days studying astronomy charts, lying out on the beach with the words "ABDUCT ME" carved into the sand, and crafting his own intergalactic cape.

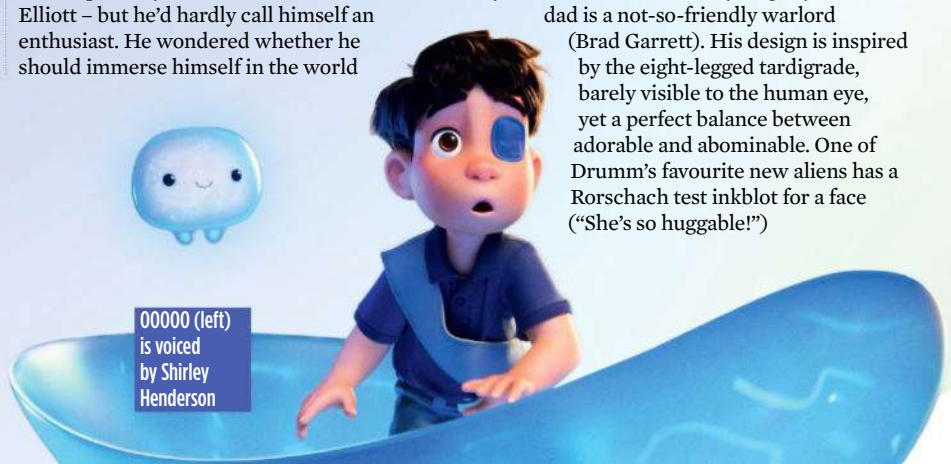
An idea was had, then, to host a hand-made cape competition judged by the tailoring and simulation departments. "We're stopping work so that everyone can build capes, and we're going to have a fashion show, and that might not feel efficient, but it's actually amazing," Drumm recalls. "My wife's like, 'You're not doing any work!' There's also a lot of work. But it's fun, and it's team building, and it's creative, and it's a wonderful way to connect."

At Pixar, being "super flexible" also means constantly keeping your mind open to new ideas. Molina wasn't entirely unfamiliar with classics of the sci-fi genre – Elio, after all, was named partially after *ET The Extra-Terrestrial*'s Elliott – but he'd hardly call himself an enthusiast. He wondered whether he should immerse himself in the world of B-movies and VHS oddities. Was his ignorance a weakness? "That's kind of cool, though, because you bring a fresh perspective," Pixar's chief creative officer, Pete Docter, told him. "So don't worry too much."

Molina knew, for example, that he wanted to avoid humanoid, bipedal aliens, the product of decades of men in little green costumes, so his team looked instead to the world of deep sea and microbiotic creatures.

GLORDON'S ALIVE

Once in the Communiverse, Elio makes friends with the bug-bodied, sharp-toothed, eyeball-less Glordon (Remy Edgerly), whose dad is a not-so-friendly warlord (Brad Garrett). His design is inspired by the eight-legged tardigrade, barely visible to the human eye, yet a perfect balance between adorable and abominable. One of Drumm's favourite new aliens has a Rorschach test inkblot for a face ("She's so huggable!")



00000 (left) is voiced by Shirley Henderson

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Elio harks back to classic Disney with its tale of adventure.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!

On the many voices of Elio

On a space probe known as Voyager 1, the farthest man-made object from us, sits a phonograph record. Among other things, it contains anatomical drawings, Morse code, and Chuck Berry's "Johnny B Goode" – a snapshot of who we are and the planet we live on, created as an ambassadorial gift to any intelligent extraterrestrial lifeform that may come across it.

It's featured early on in *Elio*, as we hear a chorus of voices, some of the 55 spoken greetings in both ancient and modern languages included on what's known as the Voyager Golden Record (a second, identical record was also sent off in Voyager 2). As Drumm reveals, the voices heard in *Elio* are all the original recordings – save for one, in a Canadian accent, the victim of a licensing issue.

For a film about communication and connection, it's no surprise that language plays such a key role. Elio's made up his own, Elioese, that he's delighted to find accommodated within the Communiverse. Drumm explains that while UK-born Jameela Jamil was cast early on as the alien ambassador Questa, it became clear that if the Communiverse was meant to feel like the United Nations, it should embrace a wide range of nationalities.

"We did work with Bryan Monroe and the Disney Character Voices," Drumm says, in reference to the division that oversees the international dubs of Disney's vast body of work. "There's actually a Japanese actress, a German actor [and] a Mexican actress. We have different languages there. So those people will do both roles, all in those territories, which I think will be fun and speak to the universality."

Sharafian and Shi, meanwhile, were a little keener on the sci-fi cinematic canon, sneaking in the odd homage here and there. Shi also suggested Talking Heads' shimmery, wistful "Once In A Lifetime" as a placeholder track for the montage depicting Elio's space fanaticism. She was a Talking Heads head, you might say – a real fan. So too was Docter.

There was only one problem: you can't really improve on Talking Heads. "It was like, well, let's do that as a placeholder song, because we're never going to use that. We won't get it or we wouldn't even do it," Drumm explains. "And then once the song was there no other song was ever, ever considered, because it felt like such a great fit."

When it was decided that Elio would wear a temporary eyepatch for much of the film's duration so that he could "arrive in space inadvertently looking like a superhero", parents at Pixar were quick to chime in. Firstly, this was great representation of a not uncommon childhood experience.

Secondly, he should obviously be wearing an adhesive eyepatch, rather than the more traditional string one. "All these parents were like, 'Are you joking? It's the adhesive.' Like, we were stupid, that's so common," Drumm jokes. It also made it a little easier for the technical team, who wouldn't have to constantly animate a piece of string going through the character's hair.

This time around, animators were also handed a little more freedom thanks to Luna, a new tool that allows the lighting to be brought into a scene much earlier in the process. Drumm recalls how on *Brave*, animators would spend hours toiling away on the smallest of details, only for them to see the final lighting and realise their work was completely obscured by darkness.

One resident of the Communiverse, OOOOO (Shirley Henderson), is essentially a liquid supercomputer. At first, the intention was to redeploy the same technology used to animate the water-based characters in Elemental, only for the idea to come about that she should be able to break apart into blobs.

That wouldn't be possible with a traditional rig, a kind of virtual skeleton that forms the basis of a character's animation. As Drumm describes, "So what if we just did this whole other idea? We're going to have no rig at all, we're just going to write code so she's not even really there." It ended up being so complicated that even she doesn't quite understand it, yet somehow the animators still worked their magic.

After all, that's how Pixar operates: someone will always come around with a fix to the problem; someone will always bring a new perspective to the table; someone will make the unexpected connection. It's the perfect environment to nurture a film like *Elio*, with its ultimate lesson that "friendship can be found anywhere" – even if it's between a human child and a terrifying space worm.

"You just never know who that person is that's going to be able to see you and help you feel grounded," says Drumm. "Sometimes you might not fit in, but your people are out there."

Elio is in cinemas from 20 June.

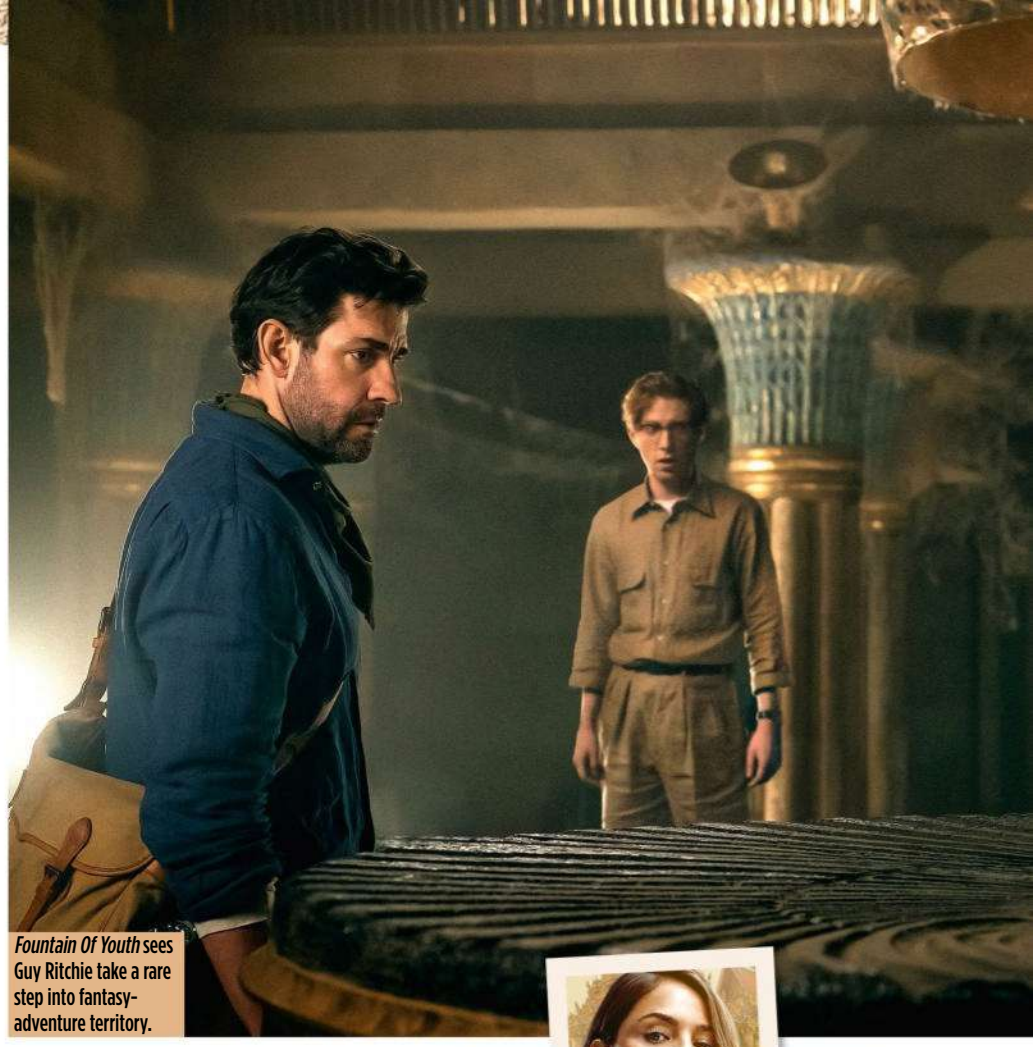
TEMPLE OF BOOM

WORDS: **JAMES MOTTRAM**

GUY RITCHIE JOINS FORCES WITH JOHN KRASINSKI AND NATALIE PORTMAN FOR

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH,

A FANTASY-ADVENTURE FILM ABOUT ESTRANGED SIBLING TREASURE HUNTERS SEEKING THE FAMED ELIXIR TO ETERNAL LIFE



Fountain Of Youth sees Guy Ritchie take a rare step into fantasy-adventure territory.

A GIANT URN, UPTURNED, DANGLES precariously over an enormous dais. John Krasinski, Natalie Portman and Domhnall Gleeson approach it watchfully. Then – out of nowhere – a broom prods this ancient artefact. Nothing like a bit of high-tech Hollywood magic, you might think. It gently starts to swing, and a huge noise comes over the speakers – BONG! – as if a giant gong has been struck. Everyone covers their ears, before the take comes to an end.

Director Guy Ritchie saunters over. "We're underneath the pyramids here," he smiles, nodding to the vast room, "so we're five and a half thousand years old." Well, almost. In truth, *SFX* is not in Egypt in the bowels of one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World, but on a studio soundstage outside London. The film is *Fountain Of Youth*, Ritchie's latest big-scale spectacle, a rare dip into fantasy-adventure for the filmmaker, recently riding high on his Netflix crime yarn, *The Gentleman*.

"I've made it my business to try and embark upon genres I'm not familiar with," explains Ritchie. "I thought I could do something challenging." Scripted by James Vanderbilt (who penned the Andrew Garfield-era *Spider-Man* films and *Zodiac*), *Fountain Of Youth* is a throwback to a classic cinema staple: a rollicking fantasy-adventure cast in the spirit of *Indiana Jones*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Uncharted*.

Intriguingly, our heroes are estranged siblings, Krasinski's Luke Purdue and his sister Charlotte, played by Portman. "I think for me, it was really this relationship [that gave it] a different twist, instead of a whole romance thing at the centre of the movie," says Krasinski. "What I really liked was that family was this thing that we often forget about, and it might be the treasure that we're all really seeking in our lives. So that was really the thing that drew me in which Indy didn't have. So there! We're ahead of Indiana Jones already! Please don't tell Harrison Ford that!"

> **"We're ahead of Indiana Jones already! Please don't tell Harrison Ford that!"**

ADVENTURE TIME

After their adventure-seeking father (named Harrison, in a wink to you-know-who) passed away, the Purdues took different paths in life. Portman's art curator Charlotte is now a divorcee and mother to young son, Thomas (Benjamin Chivers). "She has gone a much more conservative route," says the actor "She went to an art gallery, and then Luke pops back into her life and tries to get her to go on this exploration with her. She is, of course, intrigued." No prizes for guessing what they're after: the titular spring said to bestow eternal youth on those who drink its waters.

Bankrolling their treasure hunt is Gleeson's ailing billionaire Owen Carver, who has his own motivations for finding the eponymous Fountain. "He may not have long left, and he would like one big adventure," says Gleeson. "Even if they don't find it." The trouble is they're not the only interested parties. Also on their tail is Inspector Jamal Abbas, an Interpol agent who "knows all about Luke and knows all about Luke's family", according to Arian Moayed, who plays him.

Then there's the highly capable, ultra-mysterious Esme, who appears to be working for...? Well, now that would be telling. "She has a really wild interaction with Luke, and keeps sort of bumping into him," says Eiza González, the Mexican actor who reunites with Ritchie following her role in his 2024 period actioner, *The Ministry Of Ungentlemanly Warfare*. Right from the film's visceral opening, featuring a tussle on a train, Luke has more than met his match with Esme, a woman who will not give up her mission.

What results is a globe-trotting adventure that sees the story hop from Bangkok to London, Vienna and Egypt, as Luke and his team follow clues buried in art history to find the Fountain. And yes, the production did shoot at the real Pyramids – a rarity for any Hollywood movie. "Cairo was just crazy! We

EIZA GONZÁLEZ

The Guy Ritchie regular gets mysterious as Esme

Were you surprised that Guy Ritchie cast you in back-to-back films?
I was like, "There's no way that Guy would want me [again]." And in December, right after the holidays – because the holidays can be kind of grim sometimes – I was just by myself in LA and I got a call: "You got the offer." I was like, "You're joking?"

How did you develop Esme's look?
The first thing I said is, "I think we need to cut my hair off." Completely change my look. Look very different to what we did before. I want to make her completely her own.

What's she like to play?
She's just a great character to be able to play. She's just so multifaceted and fun in a very Guy Ritchie way. She's kind of following this crew of talented people and trying to find what they're trying to do, because she has ulterior motives.

© APPLE/SKYDANCE.

Also on board are Natalie Portman, Domhnall Gleeson, Laz Alonso and Carmen Ejogo.

John Krasinski stars as Indy-inspired adventurer Luke Purdue.

rented the Pyramids for a few days!" chuckles Portman. "They haven't allowed anyone to film there for a very, very long time."

Ritchie admits that he's so used to being on pre-fabricated sets, it got a little bewildering. "You forget that you're in the Pyramids! So you're not sure whether you built them!" Real or not, Ritchie seems delighted by what he's got to work with. "The sets are impressive. We've got money on this film! The last few films, we haven't had much money, so it's quite nice to come to a film where you can build these sets."

In charge of the production design is Ritchie regular Martyn John, who invested a wealth of detail into the sets: among them, circular staircases with bones carved into them, dusty corridors covered in hieroglyphics and lithe statues that took their inspiration from the one and only singer Grace Jones (no, really). Elsewhere, artisans put the finishing touches to ceiling frescos for an interior set of the Austrian National Library, an institution that acts as a vital pit stop in the Purdues' quest.

The pièce de résistance must surely be situated on the backlot, however: a recreation of the rusty innards of the RMS Lusitania, the sister ship of the Titanic, which sank in 1915 after it was torpedoed by a German submarine. All chandeliers covered in moss and barnacles as far as the eye can see, this set is capable of being raised up and down in a giant water tank. "That tank... was very special," says Portman. "I've seen screengrabs of us, and we're just laughing [manically]. We're just like 'Argh!' [It was] Freezing!"

ROCK AND ROLLER

What's surprising is not the luxurious sets, but learning just how fast and loose Ritchie plays with the story when taking it from script to set. "Everything changes in the environment. Subsequently you go, 'Here's my map. Can I improve the map?' So then we try and improve the map on the day. That keeps it alive. After a while, everyone gets used to that. Initially it may be a bit shocking, but obviously if you can't beat what's on the page, we'll just go with what's on the page."

An experienced director in his own right on films like *A Quiet Place*, Krasinski admits working with Ritchie was the "draw" of the movie. "I've been a huge Guy Ritchie fan forever. I don't know if I've been on set with a director where it's his world in its entirety – and I mean that in the best way. Though it may sound chaotic, and it does take a little time to understand the rules of how to go about starting every day with that off-the-cuff kind of writing, there is an energy to it that I've never experienced before."

Moayed agrees, remembering his first day on set at the Pyramids. "The first thing that happens is like, 'Oh, don't worry about the script at all!'" Yes, it's nerve-wracking, he admits. "But it also frees you, because you don't have anything to think about anymore. There's no preconceived notions of what it needs to be. Because Guy's team has been working, many of them, [with him] since *Lock, Stock*... you feel very much in a safe little bubble of exploring and having fun. It feels more improv-y in a weird way. But we're not really improvising."

Back on set, the atmosphere remains convivial. As one crew member touches up the cobwebs on the giant upside-down urn, Portman gives Chivers, her young co-star, a high-five. "There's nothing terribly exciting going on here," jokes Ritchie, who is happy to let his team oversee a retake. In fact, he adds, there are "many layers" to this aurally driven scene, set in what's being dubbed the Music Chamber. "This whole sequence is about sound. It's a take on frequency."

Like *Indiana Jones* before it, it's a world where myth and fantasy collide. "This is one of those movies where you'll look back and go, 'I'm so glad I did this,'" says Krasinski. "My kids are 10 and about to be eight, and Guy just showed them the opening of the movie, and they were like, 'When's this coming out?' I think they thought I was an accountant before. They can't watch *A Quiet Place* or *Jack Ryan*. So they're like, 'Where do you go every day?' And now they know!"

Fountain Of Youth is on Apple TV+ from 23 May.

DOMHNALL GLEESON

The Irishman gets his geek on as billionaire Owen Carver

Can you describe your character?

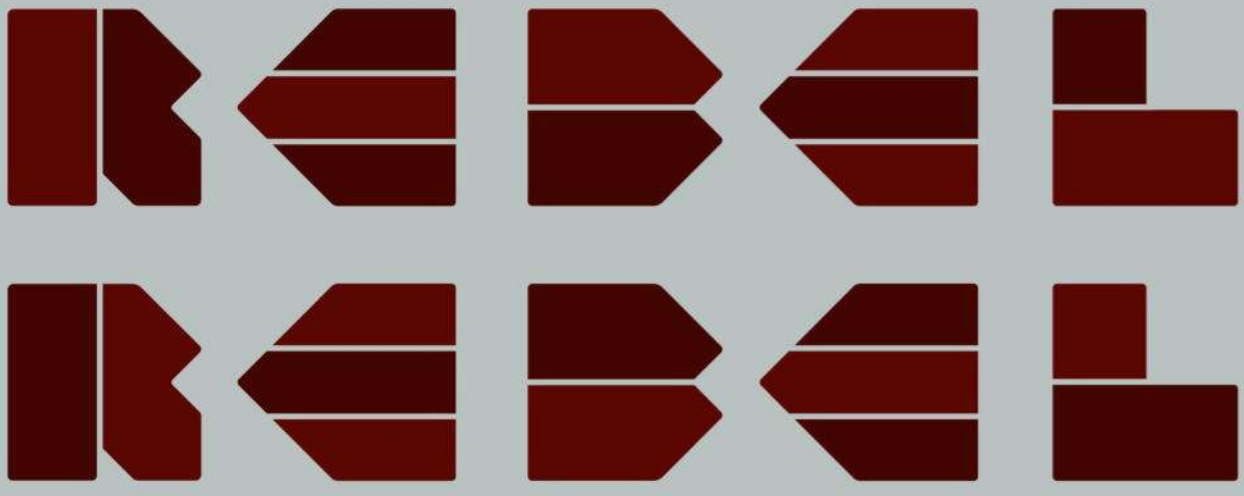
Owen is a tech billionaire, and he joins Luke's crew to fund it. He has a particular interest in this one thing, which is the Fountain of Youth. He has his own very particular reason for wanting that – his health has not been great.

What's it been like working for Guy Ritchie?

You don't know what to expect. I think you just have to turn up open and just hand yourself over to the process, because it's Guy's process, and it's his movie. And you want to be part of the spirit of that. You want to be part of the fun of that.

He's known for changing things on the day. What's that been like?

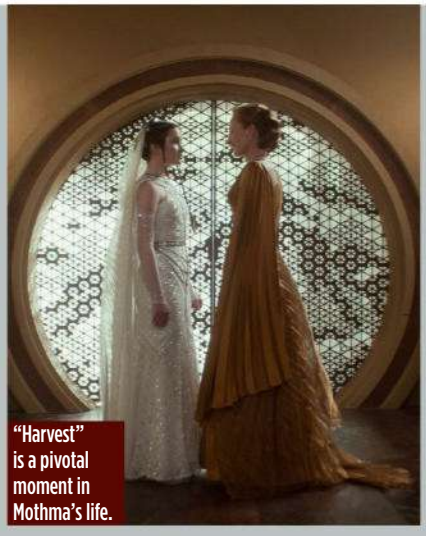
I've not done anything in this way before, but it's great. You want to do every sort of thing in a career, and this is such a mad thing.



ACTRESS GENEVIEVE O'REILLY SHARES HER FAVOURITE MOMENTS PLAYING SENATOR MON MOTHMA IN ANDOR

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

PORTRAIT: **KYLE GALVIN**


"Harvest" is a pivotal moment in Mothma's life.

O'Reilly has fleshed out the role.

Mothma, the New Republic senator.

ACTORS ARE FOREVER ON THE HUNT. They seek characters worth exploring, productions worth investing their time and passion in, then chase those auditions that might ensure their art becomes a career. And for the lucky few, sometimes the role of a lifetime chases them.

Actress Genevieve O'Reilly is one of those actors engaged in an extended dance with a role that's been showing up repeatedly in her life for 20 years: that of *Star Wars*' Republic senator and eventual first chancellor of the New Republic Senate, Mon Mothma. While she didn't originate the role (that was actress Caroline Blakiston in *Return Of The Jedi*) O'Reilly has since embodied the strong-willed and very brave Mothma in five separate projects in the franchise.

"Over the years, it has been a surprise and a treat for me to get the opportunity to step back into her shoes, or the wig," O'Reilly tells *SFX* with genuine gratitude. "From the beginning, it was so lovely to be invited to take part, or to play her when she was younger. I felt very excited to be a part of that big *Star Wars* universe, and to get to witness it from the inside."

What makes her continuing adventures with the character even more extraordinary is that O'Reilly's first appearance as Mothma, in *Revenge Of The Sith* was cut from the film by George Lucas to better focus on Anakin Skywalker's arc towards darkness. She says at the time she received a "deeply gracious and respectful" letter of apology from producer Rick McCallum, and thought that was that.

Fast-forward to 10 years later, when she got a call out of nowhere about playing Mothma again in Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One*, set right before the events of *Star Wars*. "I never expected that, and I also think that they could have recast with anyone," O'Reilly says. "The fact that they had the generosity to reach out to me was really astounding."

WOMAN'S WORLD

As a member of the Alliance Council, Mothma is part of the Rebellion's governing body that doesn't formally allow Jyn Erso (Felicity Jones) and Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) to try to retrieve the schematics for the newly discovered Death Star. "I loved playing her [again]," the actress says. "I was 10 years older but that initial experience, of course, it still stayed in my cellular memory. Getting to step into her for *Rogue One* felt truly special. Gareth was directing that, and that felt really brave. I know this might sound trite, but it did feel like an indie film."

That was also where she was first introduced to screenwriter Tony Gilroy, who came into *Rogue One* and reworked "a number of storytelling elements" that included scenes with Mothma. "He has such a precise understanding of character and narrative, and what is required in each moment," she says. "I really revelled in that experience."

Five years later, *Star Wars* came calling again, with O'Reilly asked to reprise Mothma once more in the Disney+ prequel series *Andor*. She remembers telling a producer at the time, "'I think I'd be really interested in playing her if we could write her up. If she could be more of a character force, rather than an expositional force within the piece.' I remember they were really receptive to it, and then Tony Gilroy was there."

O'Reilly says Gilroy made it clear that he wanted *Andor* to be a "character piece" in which the story of the Rebellion is told through the eyes of ordinary people. "And to allow narrative space and storytelling time for Mon Mothma, which was new," she says.

The first season of *Andor* featured Senator Mothma as a secret collaborator and financial backer of Rebellion organiser Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård). Audiences were welcomed into the complicated personal life of the Chandrilan senator.

"You learn that she comes from a genuinely orthodox culture," O'Reilly explains. "There are strictures and rules, not only that she had to grow up with, but are very rigidly still in place. Even though she is this powerful Senator, and she is a voice for her people, when she steps home, she is within the machinations of that orthodoxy. She is a cog, and I thought that was so revelatory."

Audiences also come to know Mothma through her close friendship with her cousin Vel Sartha (Faye Marsay), also working with Luthen as a spy in the burgeoning Rebellion. "Seeing Vel have to step into that too, in the conversations of these two women and their lens, I thought, 'What a clever way to write scenes which are revelatory in themselves about character.'"

In season two, Mothma is an even bigger player in the story as she moves closer to the Rebellion and further away from the Senate and her home planet. "I feel that Cassian steps into his destiny, and while stepping into his destiny, he is surrounded by ordinary folk who also have the opportunity and do choose courage instead of fear," she says of the second season's fleshing out of the ensemble. "That's where you feel like his journey creates the apex of that triangle, and then everyone can step into their courage around that."

O'Reilly says as she got her scripts, she was amazed by how Gilroy wrote Mothma to be so "nuanced and intricate". In particular, she cites the season two episode "Harvest", which is pivotal for Mothma as she tries to protect her teenage daughter Leida (Bronte Carmichael) from undergoing a traditional Chandrilan arranged wedding.

The last of six dresses worn for the wedding.

“I know this woman in a way I just really didn’t know her before. I understand the pain”

“Tony and I had discussed this when he said she was getting married and I was like, ‘Oh, no, she’s not gonna do this to her daughter,’” she says. “He’s great about having character conversations with actors. He’s so deeply collaborative and curious about the actor’s perspective. I remember saying to him, ‘She has to give her an out. If it’s that woman who was there in *Rogue One* and *Return Of The Jedi*, I understand that there’s a pain within her. But if it is that woman who can be a pillar, then what would *she* do?’”

She says they decided to have Mothma give Leida an out, after explaining the pain of her own wedding when her drunk mother did not do the same for her. “He allows for a woman to be a Senator, to be a mother, and to be a child. She talks about her mother, so you get these intergenerational layers of one woman,” she explains. “And then for Leida to turn the way she did, it just broke my heart. It’s deeply brutal but it was a moment for Mon to gather herself. We saw that. We saw the pain. And I’m sure there were many reasons, but there is a power dynamic shift where Mon steps in to who she is. You end in this huge, big [dance] piece where you understand the chaos that everyday people have to hold. And not just everyday people, but somebody who’s managing to help build rebellion; what that is and what that chaos within that woman must be.”

THIS WOMAN’S WORK

Another notable Mothma moment comes in the ninth episode of season two, when she finally meets Andor for the first time, right after her incendiary speech condemning the Empire for the Ghorman Massacre.

“I was so curious to know how Tony was going to bring these two people together,” O’Reilly says. “I didn’t know where it was going to happen or when. But I did know that he wanted to lean into the speech and the escape from the Senate, which I was thrilled about. He was so clever to carve out a separate moment for you to really hear Mon Mothma’s voice. I’m so grateful to him for giving her that opportunity for us all, to see and hear her passion and her voice. To see her risk it all.”

She says it was perfect that in the lonely moment right after, she finally meets Cassian as he arrives to get her out alive. “What I loved about it was that there was no trumpet,” she says. “It was so subtle and beautifully human. In fact, we did it so that I was coming into a corridor and it’s almost like a second glance of, ‘Who’s that? I don’t know that guy.’ The idea that these two people really don’t know each other, and how quickly you have to decide to trust or not to trust, given everything that Mon has been through in the lead up, but then in just that 24 hours. But what he does is talk to her about Vel, and that’s really clever intimacy that Tony connected it to.

“And then, of course, that big shootout scene!” she continues of their fraught escape, her first *Star Wars* action scene. “There was that beautiful moment along that really high concourse up in Valencia where Cassian shoots her driver. To be face to face with the reality of the mortality of a rebellion, seeing someone that she knows shot in front of her, and the idea that Cassian is so trained in this.

”He’s a soldier and she is so not,” she emphasises. “She’s crossing a threshold. We played the moment so vitally different, that she would just be in shock and recoiling and this is really the moment of him offering her his hand, and her deciding to take it.”

Mothma’s story, like Cassian’s, dovetails into *Rogue One*, and the actress continues her character’s story in the animated *Star Wars Rebels* and *Ahsoka*. Asked if she thinks Mothma ever goes back to Chandrila or connects with Leida again, she muses, “In my head, you can’t have both. Of course, maybe you would want both, but by even wanting both, you risk everybody. You risk those outside the rebellion and those within it. My instinct, and this is only me, is that she devoted herself to fighting the Empire and making lives better that way.”

As for how long she’ll continue to portray Mothma in the *Star Wars* universe, O’Reilly says that is entirely dependent on others planning the ongoing narrative. “But I am really grateful that Tony and Kathleen [Kennedy] and Disney have given space for this woman to have a story,” she says. “I know this woman in a way I just really didn’t know her before. I understand the pain of her rebellion. I was always keen to be able to close that circle with Caroline Blakiston to maybe have an understanding of what is in her eyes when she says that line that everyone quotes to me, which is, ‘Many Bothans died to bring you this information.’ There was always such a pain and an empathy within her, and I was always curious what that was? I finally feel I’ve closed that circle. I go, ‘Okay, I get her now. I understand that woman all through those films and that arc.’

More importantly, she got to play Mothma as a woman who has impact with her voice alone. “She doesn’t pick up a gun, she doesn’t pick up a lightsaber,” O’Reilly points out. “She can be impactful with diplomacy, with a fierce intellect and a loud voice.”

Andor is on Disney+.

Rogue One covered a later period in Mothma’s life.

PICTURES: © LUCASFILM/DISNEY. STOCK IMAGES: MIGUEL MARTINS DESIGN/GETTY

THE BRIAN CLEMENS ARCHIVE

PART ONE

IN THE FIRST OF A SERIES, WE DISCUSS SOME OF THE UNMADE PROJECTS AND NEVER-REALISED PITCHES LEFT BEHIND BY THE LATE, GREAT BRIAN CLEMENS

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

BRIAN CLEMENS SURELY needs no introduction for most *SFX* readers... but for the benefit of younglings, we should probably provide one. One of British TV's most inventive and prolific writers, he was, as the script editor of *The Avengers*, instrumental in imbuing the '60s telefantasy series with its playful charm. Later he revived the concept for *The New Avengers*.

Other small-screen hits included ITV anthology series *Thriller*, and the action-packed crime drama *The Professionals*. He found success writing for the big screen too, most notably with 1973's *The Golden Voyage Of Sinbad* and 1974 Hammer film *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter* (which he also directed).

On his death in 2015, Clemens left behind a wealth of documentation – which his sons Sam and George (who also work in the industry, George as an editor and Sam as a director) have been struggling to get on top of ever since. "There was just so much stuff," Sam Clemens tells *SFX*. "It's taken us 10 years to go through – obviously when we have time, and when we're back [at the family home] and can face doing a section."

One major impetus was meteorological... "Dad used to keep a big chunk of his stuff, particularly unproduced things, in filing cabinets in a little outbuilding," Sam explains. "We had a terrible storm a few years ago and it took the roof off the building. So Mum called me, then in one evening we had to bring everything inside. Nothing got damaged, but it meant that we suddenly had all these files sitting around on dining tables. It forced us into going, 'What should we do?' So we went through the process of ordering new filing cabinets and trying to work out how to organise them."

At the end of last year, George took another pass, reorganising the material into produced and unproduced projects, further broken down by medium (TV/film/stage/radio). "We got a company in that took the lion's share of the scripts away and have scanned it all professionally for us," he explains. This has various benefits. "Obviously it's now safe," says Sam, "So if the house sets on fire, we're okay in terms of that."

It's also allowed them to make use of AI. "Dad repurposed ideas all the time," George explains, "so there's quite a few things I've come across where I've got them as separate items, but actually it's the same idea. Maybe he wrote it in 1962, then in 1970 repurposed it because he saw another opportunity. Thankfully, ChatGPT can do some of that leg work – you can just say, 'Are any of these similar?'"

With so much material to sift through, AI's also been invaluable in other ways. "It would take a year at least, probably, to sit and read it all," says Sam, "And who has that time, while not being paid to do that? That's why we've ChatGPT-ed much of it to go, 'What is a synopsis?' 'Ooh, this sounds good – let's have a look at it.'"

THE SIX FILES

It's not uncommon for the papers of notable writers to be donated to academic institutions. For example: Douglas Adams's alma mater – St John's College, Cambridge – holds 67 boxes of materials. It's possible the brothers might one day do something similar, at least with the projects which did see light. "There was a discussion at one point that maybe we could do it with De Montfort University, near where we are in Bedford, or something," Sam says. "Maybe we do that to keep these things properly stored. It's not off the table."

To begin with, however, the pair have focused their efforts on separating out and scanning the ideas which were never produced. These take up the lion's share of six filing cabinets, sitting in a conservatory at chez →

It was Brian who cast Diana Rigg as Emma Peel.

PICTURES: BILL ZYGMANT/SHUTTERSTOCK, STUDIOCANAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Four cabinets are full of unproduced ideas.

Clemens. "It's absolutely extraordinary how much that he wrote hasn't been done," Sam says. "I mean, we've got over 400 ideas of unproduced material. The first two cabinets were produced. Then all the other four are unproduced. And they're totally full."

"And we're clearly going to need more," adds George, "because there's still more stuff to put in."

George has been cataloguing these ideas in a mammoth Excel spreadsheet, including short synopses. The aim: to push them out to studios, in the hope that something might catch a producer's eye. "There are lots of things that people might want to take a punt on," says Sam. "A huge portion of them are full scripts. It might be a TV pilot with the treatment of what it's going to go on to, or a couple of episodes. Then some of them are just four pages of what the treatment is, but it's quite in-depth."

For starters: hey, Charlie Brooker! If you happen to be reading, it might be worth dropping Sam and George's production company Take The Shot Films a line... "Dad was always an ideas man, and had so many amazing ideas," says George.

"I go through and I'm like, 'A lot of these could easily be *Black Mirror* episodes.' He fits into that genre very well: the weird and wonderful and creepy. He was having these ideas back in the '60s and '70s, and you're now seeing them in stuff like *Black Mirror*. He had that foresight, especially when it came to technology, weirdly – which he absolutely hated and couldn't get on with." (To the very end, Clemens wrote using a typewriter.)

FATHER AND SON

We ask the brothers what they can reveal without blowing the gaff, and they tease a few highlights. "One that I found very interesting is *A Girl Called Max*, which was a very cool Western idea," says George.

"The reason I bring that up is because Sam's written a fantastic script that's going to be our third [production] as Take The Shot, called *Fall From Grace*. And they're very similar."

"I'd never seen this!" Sam underlines. Yet father and son's imaginations took them down uncannily similar paths.

"Dad's one is different enough from Sam's," George says, "but they're both very female empowerment. Basically, a young girl in the West essentially being raised as a man, and then using her femininity, as she's an older woman, to be able to take down bandits and whatnot, because they don't expect her to have those kinds of skill sets."

Other unrealised ideas are more in *SFX*'s wheelhouse. "Dad would always love serial killers, especially Jack the Ripper," he continues, "so we've got many different versions of Jack the Ripper. And a sort of Jack the Ripper/Dracula crossover, where they bring Dracula back to life but they use Jack the Ripper's heart – so it's kind of like Jack the Ripper is Dracula."

> **"It's absolutely extraordinary how much that he wrote hasn't been done"**

Britain's greatest horror studio is also well represented in the "movies that never were" category. "There's lots of things that he pitched for Hammer that obviously didn't go," says Sam. "He went where the work was, so when someone hired him he would then flood them with ideas, and they were always like, 'There's too many of these!'"

"There's one about sort of vampire cats," he continues. George finishes his thought: "Yeah, *Cat's Cradle*, also called *Cat's Paw*."

We wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't enquire about cult favourite Captain Kronos. It's well-documented that Clemens had hopes that his dashing vampire hunter creation could kickstart a franchise. "We're not necessarily releasing those yet, but he has written little ideas of what the next three or four movies would have been," Sam says. "We are talking to Hammer at the moment, because that's one property they do own..."

Fingers crossed! Other discoveries include a concept about a detective who's a descendant of Wyatt Earp, and *The Other Mr Holmes*, which would have followed investigations by Sherlock Holmes's great-grandson.

Further ideas are, in Sam's words, "not as potentially commercially viable" – such as pitches for long-since defunct TV series. And the brothers are generously allowing us to reproduce some of those. To start with, we have a *Doctor Who* idea (see right). Next issue, we'll be presenting seven fascinating pitches for James Bond films, dating back to 1975. And after that? You'll just have to wait and see...

SFX would like to thank Toby Hadoke for making us aware of the archive's existence. Check out his documentary "The House Of Clemens" on Hammer's 4K/Blu-ray release of Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter.

THE LIFE OF BRIAN

A book on Clemens is on the way

Author Robert Sellers, whose numerous works on popular culture include *The Battle For Bond* and *Hellraisers*, has also been given access to the archive. "He's doing a book about Dad," says Sam, "so he's been coming to the house for the last couple of months, and he's going through it with us to try and find correspondence and things. It's going to take him a good year or so to do.

"I think a book is deserved for the amount of work that he's done," Sam notes, "and if we don't do it soon the generations that know him will not be around, so I think it's imperative that we get something done quick. But we couldn't really do that until the archive was in a place that was accessible."

PICTURES: EVENING STANDARD/GETTY. STOCK ART: FOTOGRAPHIK/GETTY

Did Brian have Jon Pertwee's Doctor in mind?

SOUND BANDITS

Brian Clemens never wrote for *Doctor Who*, but thanks to one of George and Sam's discoveries, we now know that he at least thought about it. This one-page idea about "bandits stealing all the universe's sounds" is undated, so we don't know when it was written. "My guess is it's going to be around the '70s, in between *The Avengers* and *The New Avengers*," says Sam. We also have no way of knowing whether it was formally submitted to the *Who* production office – though it's possible a clue might yet emerge from a yet-to-be-scanned pile of correspondence.

More of a brainstorm than a structured treatment, it includes some amusingly oddball ideas, including a tap-dancing villainess called Rhythm, a "twitching disease" which afflicts the Doctor's companion, and tick-tocking "metronome people".

Two footnotes: Asdic was an early form of sonar, while 2LO was a London-based BBC radio station, on air from 1922-1930.

Sound Bandits. Doctor Who idea.

Begins when asdic echo sounder device does not bounce back - they are entering area of space ships graveyard - many ships never HEARD of again.

Sound bandits - they are staeling all the universes sounds. A treasure trove of Bach Beethoven, etc...better than gold. because when the universe a silent place, I will sell sound for millions.

Floor in huge black and white - turns out to be a piano. Loss of sound. Sound used as a weapon (harsh) as a drug - soothing, Tap dancing villainess. Rythym. Singing in the rain room. Mahler room. Pop room for wrong doers! All the people have rythym. Climax - Who breaks open Pandora's box of sound - terrible din - people whirled away through space on sound waves as mighty and powerful as strong winds. S.OS's OLD SOUNDS 'N THE ETHER.

As they approach - old 2LO calling signals etc. Strange sound from other planets. That NOISE is music to a Martian.

Sound vibrates things to destruction. Sound so high that only dogs - and certain beings - can hear.

The xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx Crow-shays (OR "CHETS"?) and the Quiverenns. A corruption down the years of crochets and quavers.

Great 'God' turns out to be a Suzaphone!

How to commuicate without sound? Everything thy say in whispers in certain room - blasts out of tannoysx elsewhere. Hitler's speeches built up as weapons. The yell of the crowd (which Who eventually identifies as Liverpool supporters chanting).

Assistant taken over by a twitching diseases - which turns out to be exaggerated rythym.

Have to identify twisted sounds to get through the sound maze. Great fun this.

They can mimic Who's voice easily. In fact a room full of peopke can talk with his voice!

A simple harmonica (kept by young kid assistant) could be an important key to release.

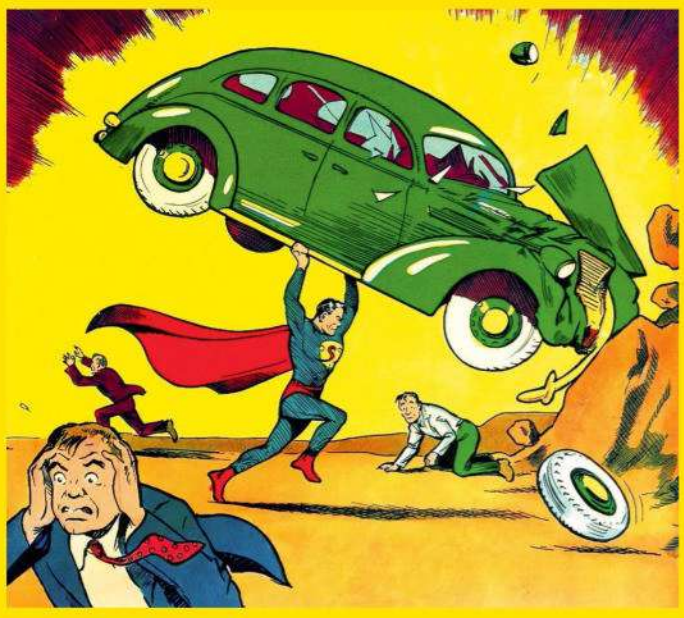
Metronome image. Or metronome people - who tick-tock their way towards you. (CLOCKWORK?)

Huge gramophone horn - they find themselves inside it.

They run from speakers about to be activated - and which will disable forever.

They have big ears - thick glasses - have over developed one sense to detriment of all others!

SOUND PLAYED 30 SECONDS - ANSWER 1ST QUESTION 2ND!



FLIGHT PATH

LOOK! UP IN THE SKY! AS SUPERMAN SOARS BACK TO THE BIG SCREEN, SFX EXPLORES THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE MAN OF STEEL

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

TRUTH? JUSTICE? THE American way? No, this dude in blue tights surely stands for just one thing: *trouble*.

There he is on the cover of *Action Comics* issue one, his cape fluttering as he hoists a car above his head and smashes it into a desert outcrop, shattering glass, buckling bodywork and sending a tyre flying. Around him ordinary Joes flee in bulging-eyed panic or stare in mute incomprehension. And who can blame them? Frankly, he looks like a maniac.

Who is this public menace and why is he dressed like a fugitive from a carnival sideshow? There are no words on the cover to introduce him, no overheated blurb to vouch for his heroic credentials. No hint of his name. The roughly sketched "S" on his chest could just as easily be the rearing head of a cobra.

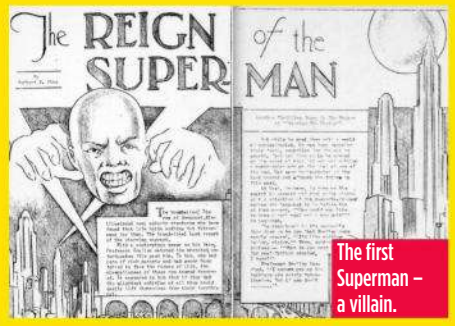
Nearly 90 years on from that explosive first appearance the whole world knows his name. The comic that once cost a slim dime on the newsstand now commands millions of dollars if it comes up at auction. And that scowling strongman on the front didn't just upend an automobile but an entire industry.

NEW BEGINNING

"Superman is the quintessential comic book character," says Dave Gibbons, artist of acclaimed 1985 tale "For The Man Who Has Everything" and writer of 1990's *World's Finest*, a mini-series that teamed the Man of Steel with the Dark Knight. "He's tailor-made for cheap four-colour printing. He's red, blue, yellow and black, and so he looks really good in crudely printed comics.

"He's also a figure of action. He flies through the air, with his cape billowing out behind him, which always adds to the sense of movement – although it's probably quite an impractical thing to be dragging around with you, in truth! But it meant Superman on those cheap pulp paper pages looked really, really exciting."

The essential myth has been told and retold, built upon and burnished across TV, novels, radio and cinema. A lone rocketship, carrying the last child of a doomed civilisation, delivering a spit-curled, super-powered saviour to planet Earth. In reality that rocket's trajectory took it to the printed page from the restless imaginations of two young men in Cleveland, Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.



The first Superman – a villain.

Students at Glenville High School, the pair had bonded over a shared love of such mind-igniting pulp magazines as *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales*. "Joe and I were tremendous science fiction fans," Siegel recalled. Pooling their talents, they created their own fanzine, *Science Fiction*, aping the pulps they devoured. This mimeographed mag modestly declared itself "The Advance Guard of Future Civilisation". Go, Cleveland!

In January 1933 *Science Fiction* ran Siegel's short story "The Reign Of The Superman". However, only the name foreshadowed their later creation. This particular Superman was a villain, a homeless man who'd been experimented upon and transformed into a megalomaniac with fearsome mental abilities. Siegel and Shuster's second stab at a character called Superman – this time intended for the burgeoning comic-book market – was a generic adventurer with no superpowers or costume. Depressed at the strip's rejection, Shuster reportedly burned every page.

Inspiration finally struck Siegel one sleep-deprived night in 1934. "I am lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me," he recalled. "I conceive a character like →

COMIC IMAGES © DC COMICS. THE REIGN OF THE SUPERMAN: ALAMY

SUPERMAN
10¢
64 PAGES OF ACTION!
ALL IN FULL COLOR
THE COMPLETE STORY OF THE DARING EXPLOITS OF THE ONE AND ONLY
SUPERMAN

Siegel and Shuster at a 1975 news conference.

Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one. Only more so." *Only more so*. Yes, that was the key to it all, the essential mantra that would unlock a phenomenon. The next morning, his brain still on fire with the possibilities, Siegel dashed the 10 blocks to his pal's house. "I thought it was a terrific idea and we went to work, right then and there," said Shuster, remembering how he had jumped to the drawing board. "We spent the entire day working on it."

GET THE LOOK

Fittingly for a Man of Steel, Superman is an alloy, a fusion of raw materials. There's a clear debt to pulp adventurer Doc Savage: not only is Doc known as the Man of Bronze but his first name is Clark and he even retreats on occasion to his own icy Fortress of Solitude. Siegel and Shuster's vision of Krypton took inspiration from the Flash Gordon newspaper strip, while the pair craftily flipped the premise of Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter stories, in which an Earthman hero is granted superior strength and agility by the gravity of another planet. Also key was Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, the tale of "a super-child, an invulnerable man", created by a scientist – "I'm like a man made out of iron instead of meat," declares its übermensch protagonist.

More inspiration came from the spinach-fuelled slapstick of *Popeye* cartoons, which first hit cinemas in 1933. "The super-strength and action were absolutely sensational," remembered Siegel. "I thought, this is really great but... what if it featured a straight adventure character?"

Popeye wasn't the only big-screen influence. Superman's physicality was borrowed from swashbuckling star Douglas Fairbanks Sr, who Shuster visualised with "hands on hips and his feet spread apart, laughing – taking nothing seriously." Alter ego Clark Kent, meanwhile, was modelled on bespectacled silent comedy star Harold Lloyd. "We especially loved some of those movies in which Harold Lloyd would start off as a sort of mama's boy, being pushed around, kicked around, thrown around, and then suddenly would turn into a fighting whirlwind."

Shuster knew what it was like to be pushed around. Bullied as a kid, he later enrolled on a bodybuilding course. Siegel also poured his power fantasies into Superman's creation: "I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn't know I existed or didn't care I existed. It occurred to me: 'What if I was real terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that? Then maybe they would notice me.'" One of Siegel's unrequited crushes was a fellow high school student

"Like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one"

Fairbanks and Lloyd: two inspirations for Superman.

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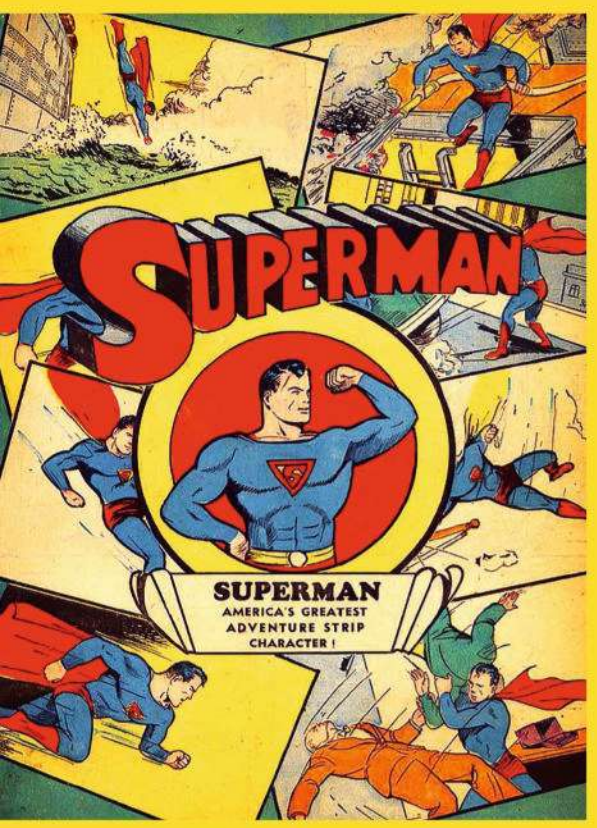
SIEGEL AND SHUSTER PORTRAIT: BETTMANN/GETTY. STILLS FROM THE IRON MASK AND WHY WORRY: BETTMAN/GETTY.

THE BULLET RICOCHETS OFF SUPERMAN'S TOUGH SKIN!
THIS IS NO TIME FOR HORSEPLAY!
DON'T YOU REALIZE? I'VE PROOF SHE'S INNOCENT AND YOU ALONE CAN SAVE HER!
LET ME SEE THOSE PAPERS
HURRY! — CONNECT ME WITH THE PENITENTIARY!
STOP! THE GOVERNOR HAS PARDONED HER!
THANK GOD I TOLD YOU I WAS INNOCENT!
HE'S GONE — DISAPPEARED!
YES — BUT HERE'S A NOTE HE LEFT SIR. — "YOU'LL FIND THE REAL MURDERESS BOUND AND DELIVERED ON THE LAWN OF YOUR ESTATE"
NEXT MORNING AS KENT LEAVES FOR THE NEWSPAPER UPON WHICH HE WORKS AS A REPORTER . . .
HAVE YOU HEARD? THE CURRY GIRL IS INNOCENT!
LET'S SEE THE PAPER!
GOOD! I'M NOT MENTIONED!
DAILY STAR
RELEASED
MILES AWAY, IN THE GOVERNOR'S PRIVATE CHAMBER
GENTLEMEN, I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE MY SENSES! HE'S NOT HUMAN! — THANK HEAVEN HE'S APPARENTLY ON THE SIDE OF LAW AND ORDER!
A page from *Action Comics* issue one.



named Lois, whose name would be pinched for Daily Planet journo Lois Lane, a character inspired by Glenda Farrell's fast-talkin' turn as a girl reporter in the *Torchy Blane* movies.

Superman and Clark. The god disguised as the geek. For Dave Gibbons, that duality is one of the core appeals of this modern myth. "Clark Kent is a not particularly impressive person," he tells *SFX*. "He's a bit shy, he's a bit weighed down by the world, he's not very assertive. People tend to undervalue him. If they only knew he was Superman, how differently they would think of him, how differently they would behave. For all the powerless-feeling adolescent boys out there, it's the idea that you might look like a dweeb but if only people knew you better they'd realise you were superhuman and a really valuable person – that would make you feel better."

TIME FOR ACTION

Originally conceived as a newspaper strip, chasing such recent successes as *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*, the Man of Steel found his first home in comic books. Siegel and Shuster's creation Dr Occult had already seen print in this newborn medium – with his cape, super strength and power of flight he's in many ways another Superman prototype – but this latest character, they sensed, was next level. "We really felt that we had something that was very different," said Siegel. "Something that the public would really take to its heart."

Their instincts were right. Launching *Action Comics* – "a dandy new magazine filled with original adventure features and pictures in Color!" – Superman was an instant sensation. Sales built as word of mouth spread. Each new Superman cover boosted that readership. A year later the Man of Steel won his own title. The cover of *Superman* 1 finds him hovering gracefully above Metropolis, secure in his status as a pop-culture icon, far removed from that caped berserker who flung cars around. He's smiling, serene. It's Siegel's dream of "What if I was real terrific?" made manifest.

The early Superman is an exuberant, mischievous presence on the page, given to teasing the bad guys. He's also a principled, compassionate hero, echoing the social conscience of his creators. With a taste for taking down racketeers, slum landlords and crooked officials, he also foils occasional invasions in fictional European nations. When America entered the Second World War the publishers removed him from the frontline – he was just too powerful for a real-world conflict – but drafted him as a propaganda tool instead, a super-patriot urging kids to buy war bonds to support the war effort. And there was plenty of homegrown villainy to occupy him Stateside. His arch-nemesis Lex Luthor →

THE GREATEST SUPERHERO TEAM-UP OF ALL TIME!
THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY
SUPERMAN VS THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN
THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN
THE MAN OF STEEL
ABSOLUTE SUPERMAN
ALL IN

debuted in *Action Comics* 21 – complete with a full head of red hair.

Now a star of million-selling monthly titles, popular enough to warrant his own fan club and spawn an onslaught of red and blue merchandise, Superman soared into other media to become a household name. A syndicated newspaper strip debuted in 1939, offering the first detailed account of the destruction of Krypton. A radio serial followed a year later, introducing such core elements of the lore as Jimmy Olsen, Kryptonite and the deathless catchphrase "Up, up and away!". Fleischer Studios, creator of the Popeye cartoons that had so wowed Siegel, brought Superman to the screen in 1941 in a series of stunningly animated shorts.

Former Broadway dancer Kirk Alyn became cinema's first live-action Man of Steel in 1948, battling the Spider Lady in a 15-chapter serial. He returned for 1950's *Atom Man Vs Superman*, made on a typically penny-pinching budget by producer Sam Katzman. "I never used a telephone booth [to change] in Superman because Sam thought it would cost too much to have it moved around," Alyn lamented. The burly George Reeves inherited the cape in 1951's equally cost-conscious feature *Superman And The Mole Men* and also made a cheery, barrel-chested Kryptonian across 104 episodes of TV's *Adventures Of Superman*.

LASTING LEGACY

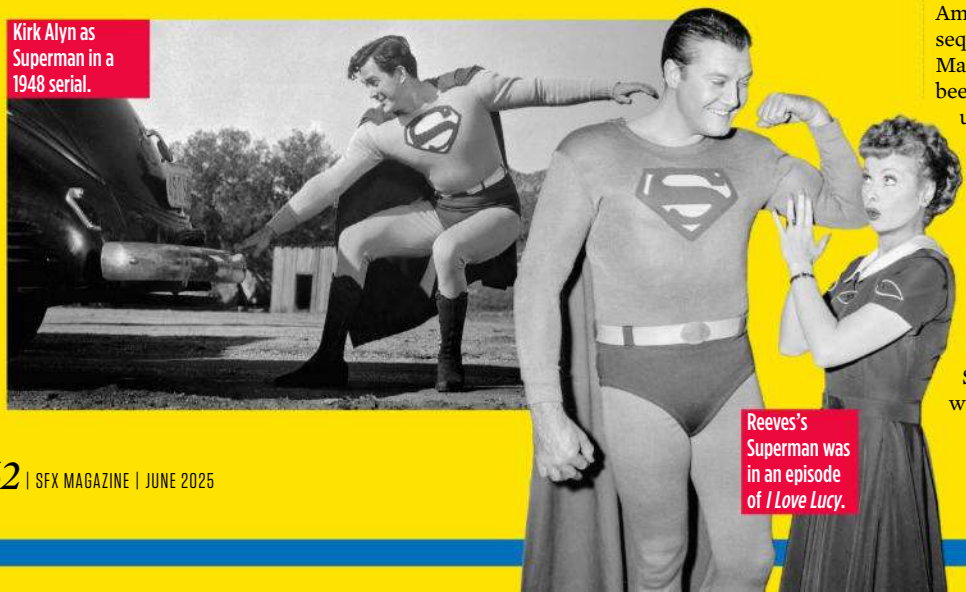
On the printed page the mythology expanded in sweetly bizarre directions. Superboy, Supergirl and a whole menagerie of pets from Krypto the Super-Dog to Comet the Super-Horse created a cosy family feel even as plots spiralled into high-concept wackiness. The introduction of Red Kryptonite, with its unpredictable consequences, licensed bonkers leaps of logic as Superman found himself transformed into everything from dragons to toddlers. So-called *Imaginary Stories* showed what would happen "If Luthor Were Superman's Father!" As editor Mort Weisinger observed, "He's invulnerable. He's immortal. Even bad scripts can't hurt him."

As the Silver Age of comics turned to Bronze, Superman became a dependable, if slightly square, fixture in the superhero firmament. Sure, DC deployed him as a corporate big gun for 1976's *Superman Vs The Amazing Spider-Man* team-up. But in terms of pure pop-culture buzz, the original superhero had been overtaken by the generation of masked upstarts that followed in his wake, Marvel's altogether hipper web-slinger among them.

"On the printed page the mythology expanded in sweetly bizarre directions"

It took 1978's movie *Superman* to restore his status. Another fantasy blockbuster to follow the phenomenon of *Star Wars*, Richard Donner's film rightly framed Siegel and Shuster's creation as a classic piece of Americana (the pair earned a credit in the title sequence after a long legal battle against DC). Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman may have been the big names for the billboards but unknown star Christopher Reeve – who beat the likes of Robert Redford, Sylvester Stallone and Jon Voight to the role – not only perfectly embodied but understood the last son of Krypton.

"Clark is an indispensable part of the folklore," Reeve said while promoting 1987's *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace*, the last of a diminishing run of sequels to that first film. "He makes the fantasy of Superman more appealing. The idea that within this apparent klutz is this shining

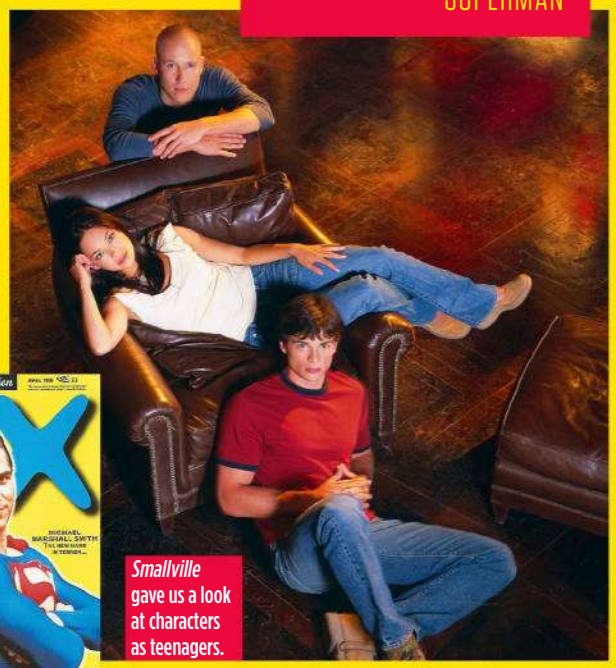


Kirk Alyn as Superman in a 1948 serial.

Reeves's Superman was in an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

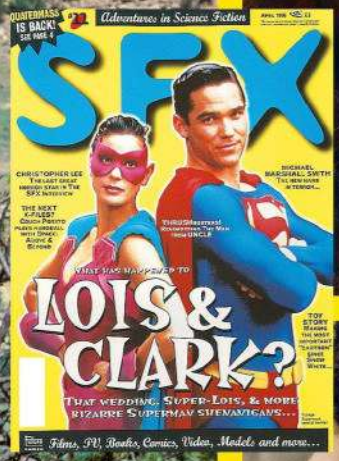
ALL COMICS IMAGES ® DC COMICS. SUPERMAN VS THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN ® DC/MARVEL. GEORGE RINHART/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES (1). CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY (1). ALLSTAR PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY (1) LIMITED. / ALAMY. SUPERMAN LEGACY ® DC/WARNER BROS.

A new era for blockbuster SF, a new era for Superman.



Smallville gave us a look at characters as teenagers.

Despite box-office success, Snyder's film has no sequel.


SFX
Adventures in Science Fiction
LOIS & CLARK?
That wedding, Super-Lois, & more bizarre Superman shenanigans...
Films, TV, Books, Comics, Video, Models and more...

hero is a fantasy to which all of us in the audience can relate. Clark is a way to connect this hero to the audience."

The comics have also found ways to rejuvenate Superman's appeal, from *The Man Of Steel*, a canon-smashing reboot by hotshot creator John Byrne in 1986, to the headline-grabbing *Death Of Superman* saga of the early '90s. Grant Morrison's stint on *Action Comics* in 2011 returned the character to Siegel and Shuster's conception of a socially-conscious champion of the underdog. More recently, *Absolute Superman* has delivered an audacious alt-universe spin, showcasing a hero who arrived on Earth as an adult, not a starchild.

New Supes David Corenswet saves a girl.

The screen has also seen multiple takes on the character in more recent decades, as wildly diverse as the '90s rom-com vibe of TV's *Lois & Clark*, the teen angst of '00s prequel *Smallville*, and the troubled god of Zack Snyder's *Man Of Steel* (2013). This July James Gunn reboots the character yet again in a new movie titled, simply, *Superman*, which sees David Corenswet tearing open the shirt to reveal that fabled S.

"I've been reading Superman comics for way past 60 years," says Dave Gibbons, when asked how he approaches writing a genuine icon. "After that time you pick up an idea of what he would say or do. It's like 'What would Jesus do?' What would Superman say? What would Superman do? And actually the answer to that is quite clear-cut. You can immediately tell whether it rings true or not, having absorbed all these Supermen.

"And even with the various varieties of Superman there are core things which never seem to get stale, or go out of fashion."

It's a bird! It's a plane!

It's Superman. Who else?

Superman is in cinemas from 11 July.

USSR ENTERPRISE

When the Red Son rose

Written by Mark Millar, 2003's *Superman: Red Son* pivots on an intriguing counter-factual: what if Krypton's survivor had been raised in the Soviet Union?

"One of the greatest tricks in writing is to imagine the opposite of something iconic and the story pretty much writes itself," Millar tells *SFX*. "What if the most treasured piece of Americana in pop-culture history was ideologically inverted and became the greatest figure in Soviet propaganda, successfully spreading Communism to the entire world?

"The concept actually came to me as a kid when I read *Superman 300*, a reimagining of his origin where Superman's rocket landed in neutral waters and both the Americans and the Soviets were rushing to claim him... This was my first understanding of ideological opposites and what an alternate timeline would be, which felt very exciting.

"I pitched this story to DC when I was 13, sold it when I was 26, and it finally came out when I was 33!"

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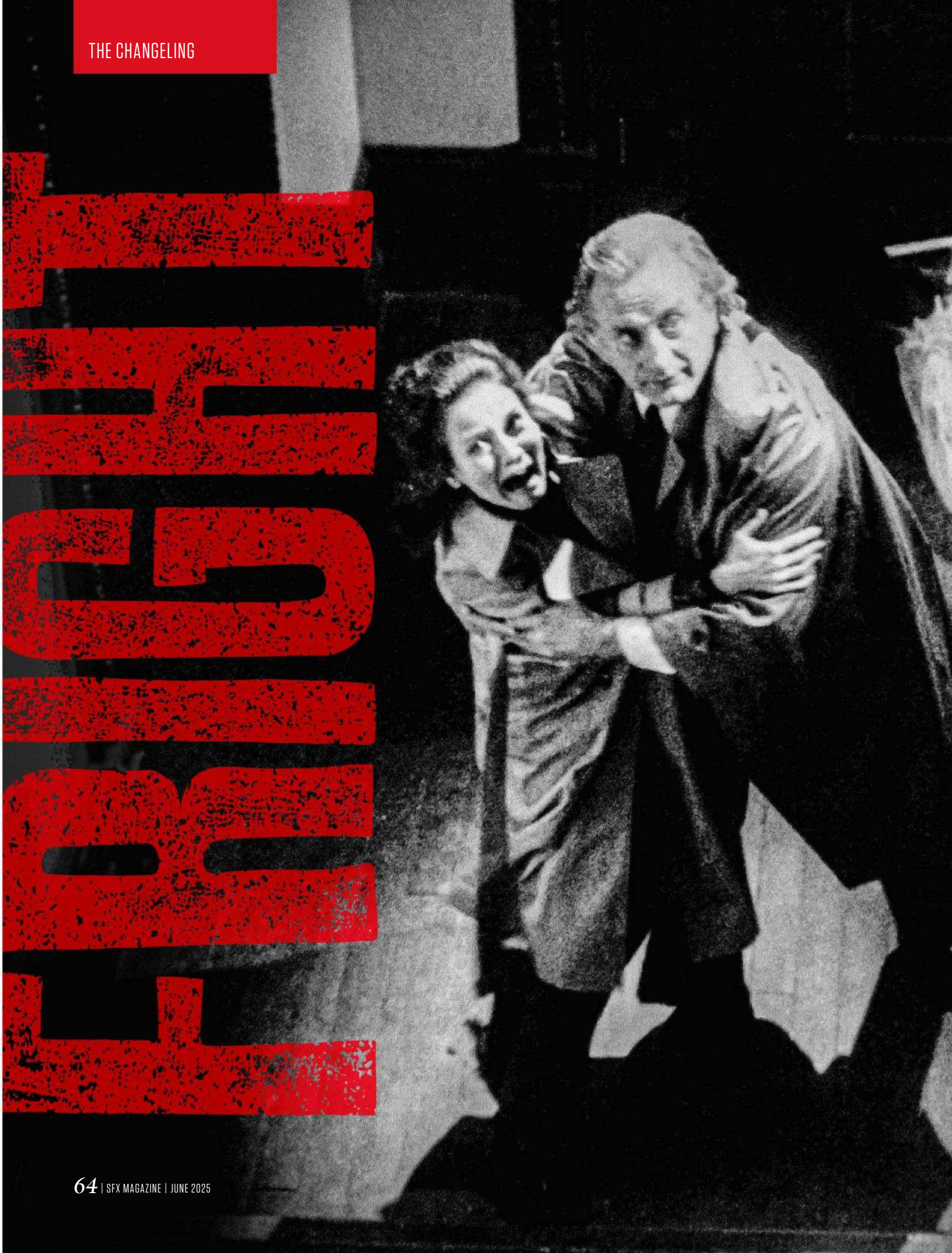
LOIS & CLARK AND SMALLVILLE IMAGES © THE CW/WARNER BROS. MAN OF STEEL © DC/WARNER BROS. STOCK ART © FOTOGRAPHIK/GETTY.

PERFECT FOIL



HAUNTED

PETER MEDAK REVEALS HIS METHODS BEHIND DIRECTING THE CHANGELING, ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING MOVIES OF ALL TIME

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

John (George C Scott) clings on for dear life.

"IT'S NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM doing a comedy movie and how you set up a joke and present the punchline," explains director Peter Medak to *SFX*. "It's the same with how you create horror and scariness – it's all in the timing of the cut and how you please the audience, how you escalate it, and then you absolutely puncture the balloon and 'Boom!'"

Medak was responsible for directing the 1980 psychological supernatural horror *The Changeling*, considered by such cinematic luminaries as Spielberg, Scorsese and Guillermo del Toro as one of the scariest films ever made.

"I was always attracted to supernatural things because, unfortunately, I had a brother that passed away at a very early age when I was 14, and I always felt his presence throughout my entire life," he continues. "So this added value to it to try and make a very clean, classic psychological thriller, which is kind of an investigative journey."

BUILDING TENSION

The Changeling concerns New York composer John Russell (George C Scott), who relocates to Seattle after helplessly witnessing the tragic roadside death of his wife and daughter. Holed up alone in a massive, long-vacant rental house to concentrate on his composing, he slowly becomes embroiled in the home's haunting history when a malevolent presence reaches out to him.

Rather than a blood-drenched jump-scare affair, *The Changeling* is a much more restrained, slow-building suspenseful ghost story in the shape of Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* and Robert Wise's *The Haunting* – where psychological suggestion brings the fright factor.

"I thought those films were very beautifully done, and I was always fascinated by these supernatural but very clean movies," continues the 87-year-old filmmaker, who was equally inspired by the 1944 shocker *The Uninvited*. "I worked as an [assistant] director and desperately wanted to work on *The Haunting*. I didn't get the job, but I knew Robert [Wise] at the time and visited the set. I was always fascinated by scary things but particularly things which were real and believable."

Indeed, *The Changeling* was based on the purportedly real case of composer Russell Hunter, who in 1968 moved into a sprawling mansion in Denver, Colorado, and soon began experiencing strange disturbances that included banging doors, vibrating walls and water suddenly gushing from taps. This led to him discovering a secret room with a journal that (with the help of a subsequent séance) unravelled the century-old mystery behind a deceased sickly child secretly buried by his parents and "replaced" by an orphan to acquire his inheritance.

Scott in front of the custom-built "house".

Medak's film follows these alleged events very closely, so naturally, the setting was integral. Although an appropriate exterior was sought in British Columbia, location scouts couldn't find anything with the unique gothic quality the filmmaker was after. Therefore, the sprawling three-storey Chessman residence was painstakingly constructed from scratch.

This included creating a gothic exterior facade with enough depth to enable interior lighting details and the introduction of special effects, as well as a separate massive multi-floored interior set with wood-panelled retractable walls to create an authentically antique home that Medak could easily film in. "Everything was a set, and it was all built in Vancouver by a wonderful English production designer, Trevor Williams," explains Medak. "I was very keen to be able to shoot things in one shot and go up to three floors in the building – the supernatural was suggested, as really very little happens in the film."

To capture his chilling story, Medak employed cinematographer John Coquillon, who had shot classics like *Witchfinder General* and *Straw Dogs*, and adopted low-angle wide lenses initially developed by Stanley Kubrick and later used for *The Shining*.

"The movement of the camera is so important because you're creating someone always watching, you're creating another character," says Medak. "I loved Mr Hitchcock, and I

Melvyn Douglas as the Senator: boo, hiss!

PICTURES: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/ASSOCIATED FILM DISTRIBUTION/GETTY. STOCK ART BY MIKE JONES/GETTY

Trish Van Devere appears as a love interest.

John Russell confronts Senator Carmichael.

Claire is menaced by a haunted wheelchair.

had worked on *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* and did a lot of *The Changeling* thinking how he would do it."

George C Scott was cast against type as lead John Russell, providing an uncharacteristically subdued performance as the middle-aged father consumed by grief, bringing welcome believability to the plot.

"He was probably one of the most interesting actors I had worked with," says Medak. "He was a giant of an American actor, and he was very cooperative although he had this very difficult reputation. He was just fantastic to work with and was very realistic, straightforward, and so wonderful in his performance."

One of the most iconic sequences in the film remains the deeply unsettling red ball of a deceased child that bounces down the staircase to land in front of Scott – an in-camera sequence that was understandably tricky to achieve before the existence of CG.

"There were no special effects whatsoever, and the prop people tried to fix it with the ball, and it never worked!" reveals Medak. "After about three or four attempts, I said, 'Give me that damn ball!' I went to the top of the steps and thought, 'I would look like an absolute idiot if it won't land in front of George after bouncing down the steps'. However, after I let it go, it stopped exactly in front of him!

"I love that George goes to the bridge and throws the ball away, and then it bounces down the stairs again, it's petrifying. The simplest things can become very scary, but you must know how to time your shots so that it becomes scary."

This scene was most recently paid homage to in the 2015 horror mystery *Crimson Peak* by Guillermo del Toro, a filmmaker who has a tremendous admiration for both the movie and Medak.

"Every time I see him, he says, 'The master is here!' and I say, 'Stop it!'", laughs Medak. "He loves *The Changeling*, and what a director he is."

Another renowned sequence, which comes later in the movie, involves a child's wheelchair chasing Trish Van Devere's character around the house until she falls down the stairs. "I just loved what we did with it," says Medak. "It isn't really perfect, but it's kind of scary because it's set up the right way, and it just moves a little bit and then freezes, and then little by little, it starts chasing Trish down the staircase."

Forty-five years after its original release, *The Changeling* retains its power to unsettle. However, it's the film's prevailing sense of melancholy concerning emotional pain, death and loss that remains particularly poignant.

> **"The movement of the camera is so important because you're creating someone watching"**

"Both Spielberg and Scorsese say *The Changeling* is one of their favourite movies, and they both have their own 35mm copy," reveals Medak. "Martin said to me years ago, when he was making *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, 'I would love to have lunch with you if we could screen *The Changeling*, and I'd like you to talk me through it.' Spending three or four hours with Martin talking about *The Changeling* was wonderful, because he has the most curious mind."

The Changeling continues to inspire curiosity, with Medak revealing that there aren't a couple of months that go by where he doesn't have to attend a retrospective film screening and talk about it.

"The audience are so curious; they want to know how you did this and why did you do it," he says. "It's the best prize you can be given – the appreciation of the public and the appreciation of the young generation."

The Changeling is available on DVD, 4K Blu-ray and Prime Video.

BAD MANORS

Haunted house shockers equally worth checking into

THE UNINVITED (1944)

Along with *The Innocents* and *The Haunting*, Peter Medak acknowledges the influence of this vintage shocker upon *The Changeling*, and it's not difficult to see why. The deeply atmospheric film concerns a composer (Ray Milland) who slowly uncovers the unsavoury history of the Cornish gothic mansion he has purchased.

THE INNOCENTS (1961)

Jack Clayton's gothic psychological horror, beautifully photographed by Freddie Francis, arguably remains the best adaptation of *The Turn Of The Screw*, capturing the uniquely unnerving horror and deep melancholy of Henry James's classic novella. The silent scene of hide and seek where the face of the deceased Peter Quint emerges in the window pane behind Deborah Kerr retains its terrifying chill.

THE HAUNTING (1963)

Robert Wise's adaptation of Shirley Jackson's acclaimed 1959 novel *The Haunting Of Hill House* remains a decidedly eerie affair. *The Changeling* owes a clear debt to its inventively subdued depiction of the unsettling presence that appears to haunt the house with a sordid past.

POLTERGEIST (1982)

Apparently, producer Steven Spielberg screened *The Changeling* multiple times for the crew during the production of his suburban horror hit, a collaboration with director Tobe Hooper. Despite the effects-laden climax, the old-school, in-camera effects resonate most strongly. This includes kitchen chairs silently stacking themselves on top of a kitchen table in the space of seconds, and the classic, still hair-raising sequence in which a toy clown comes to terrifying life.

WHAT LIES BENEATH (2000)

The mark of Hitchcock is unashamedly all over director Robert Zemeckis's spine-chilling supernatural thriller. It sees Michelle Pfeiffer investigating the death of a young girl after sensing the presence of a malignant something in the lakeside home she shares with hubby Harrison Ford. Notably, it features a goosebump-inducing séance sequence indebted to *The Changeling*.

THE ORPHANAGE (2007)

The Changeling's blueprint of masterfully played psychological suggestion over blood and gore is picked up here in JA Bayona's chilling Del Toro-produced shocker. The setting is, likewise, a sprawling empty gothic mansion with secrets to unravel, and the terror is cranked up thanks to atmospheric scares and an emotionally committed lead performance by Belén Rueda.

PHOTO 12, MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD, ALBUM, PICTURELUX / THE HOLLYWOOD ARCHIVE/ALAMY, DREAMWORKS/FOX, TELECINCO CINEMA/WARNER BROS

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

LINWOOD BARCLAY

Do the locomotion: a bestselling thriller writer turns to horror

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Ellis Parrinder

THE NEW NOVEL BY LINWOOD BARCLAY, *Whistle*, is not one for anyone who has siderodromophobia – a fear of railways. "When I describe this book for people, sometimes I say, 'This book will do for toy trains what Chucky did for dolls,'" Barclay says, with evident satisfaction. "It's just not fair that dolls and mechanical monkeys or rocking horses or ventriloquist's dummies get all the good action when it comes to horror and thrillers."

Not any longer, because *Whistle* is a supernatural horror that has all the slow-building creepiness of a Stephen King story. It doesn't charge up the tracks at you; it chugs along, getting up steam before racing ahead after it hits full speed. "It couldn't just be somebody gets this old house and there's a train set in the box, it's creepy, and weird shit starts happening," says Barclay.

The book begins with a foreshadowing of bad events up the line as we're introduced to recently widowed Annie Blunt, a bestselling children's author whose career has become mired in controversy. Needing to get away from the city, she heads to upstate New York with her son, Charlie.

A second narrative takes us back to 2001 and follows a local police chief, Harry Cook, as he deals with a series of strange happenings that follow on from a shop selling model railways opening in the town of Lucknow. The choice of year was important to making the book work, in that Cook is isolated because the world's attention is focused elsewhere: on the 9/11 attacks. "This chief of police is so removed from all that, that nobody's going to be paying attention," says Barclay.

TRACK RECORD

Barclay also drew on his own experiences as a young journalist in describing how disaster can suddenly strike. In November 1979, a train carrying chemicals – including chlorine – and explosives derailed in Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto. "All of Mississauga, hundreds of thousands of people, was evacuated for five days while they tried to put out a fire on the train," he remembers, recalling how he was reporting from a hospital when the word came to relocate. "The likelihood was the train would explode, and of course, chlorine gas displaces oxygen, and wherever it landed people would just perish." In the event, nobody died and the event is remembered as the "Mississauga Miracle". But what if things had turned out differently?

How he came to be a cub reporter in Canada is a story that begins with his American father, an illustrator, being offered a job at an advertising agency in Toronto. The family relocated. One of Barclay senior's drawings graces *Look Both Ways* (2022), a cautionary tale of self-driving cars.

From an early age, Barclay wrote. As he speaks to us down the line from his home in Toronto, there's a *The Man From UNCLE* poster visible. The '60s spy show, he says, "kind of imprinted itself on me", to the extent that he began penning his own stories starring Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin. "One episode a week was not enough for me; I had to have more. So I would take those characters and write my own adventures starring them."

Attending Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, Barclay had a plan: "To become a bestselling novelist". He wrote a couple of books that weren't published – "and we can all be grateful for that". A reappraisal was needed. "When I finished university, it became clear my plan was not going to go as I'd hoped," he deadpans, "So I thought, 'Where can a guy get paid money to write every day?'"

PAPER TRAIL

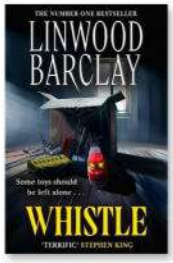
A long career in newspaper journalism began at *The Peterborough Examiner*. It was sometimes "boring as hell", but eventually he gained enough experience to land a job on *The Toronto Star* as a copy editor. Over the years, he graduated to writing a humorous column. He wrote a memoir, and a series of comic mysteries starring a detective, Zack Walker, who also works as a newspaper columnist.

The workload, Barclay says, was "killing me", at which point his agent advised him to write "a big thriller". He kept sending her ideas she rejected until he devised a plot involving a teen who wakes to find her family home empty. Twenty five years later, the mystery of what happened to her parents and brother still hasn't been solved. His agent phoned immediately. "'What happened to the family?' I said, 'No idea.' She said, 'You'll figure that out.'"

He did and, helped by Richard and Judy's Bookclub, *No Time For Goodbye* became the UK's biggest-selling novel of the year in 2008. It was time to quit the day job, but the work ethic of newspaper journalism has never left Barclay – as *SFX* learns by telling Barclay how another former reporter, Terry Pratchett, accustomed to hitting daily deadlines, couldn't understand the idea of writer's block.

"I think it's so adorable that writers are the one profession that you get this condition to describe not working that excuses you from not working," he says. "I mean, is there plumber's block? Is there teacher's block? Is there accountant's block?" Expect another finely honed novel to pull up at the station next year.

Whistle is published by HQ on 5 June.



BIODATA

From
Darien, Connecticut, United States

Greatest Hits
Since he first hit the bestseller lists with *No Time for Goodbye* (2007), Barclay has specialised in writing thrillers, including the Promise Falls series that began with *Too Close To Home*.

Random Fact
Barclay is himself a model railway fan. When he's buying a new house, he says, he goes "straight to the basement" to see if there's room for a track.

> “This book will do for toy trains what Chucky did for dolls”

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edited by Ian Berriman

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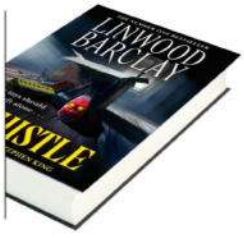

84 WHISTLE

→ Thriller writer Linwood Barclay turns to horror for this tale of a malevolent toy train set.

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THUNDERBOLTS*

From zeroes to heroes

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 127 minutes

Director **Jake Schreier**

Cast **Florence Pugh, Sebastian Stan, David Harbour, Wyatt Russell**

There's a gap in the MCU. Ever since *Avengers: Endgame* wrapped up Marvel Studios' first saga, there's been a lingering sense that the world's biggest movie franchise has lacked focus. Two new Avengers films are drifting gradually into view, but the series has suffered through meandering arcs and a lack of forward momentum, despite some solid individual movies.

*Thunderbolts** doesn't entirely fill that hole, but it does give a sense that things are finally moving in the right direction.

Nimbly directed by *Robot & Frank*'s Jake Schreier, it follows a team of D-list Marvel heroes who are forced to step up and take action when a black ops project goes badly wrong and threatens to destroy New York.

We open with Yelena, the second Black Widow (Florence Pugh) on a routine job. She clocks in, kills a few people, blows up a facility, and feels nothing. She wants to do something meaningful that isn't just taking out faceless bad guys. Unfortunately her boss Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) has other ideas. At risk of the top-secret Sentry programme being exposed, Valentina arranges a mission that will remove inconveniences such as Black Widow, Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko), Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen), and US Agent John Walker (Wyatt Russell). What she doesn't anticipate, however, is that these loose cannons quickly join forces. Also along for the ride is Bob, a nervy amnesiac brilliantly played by Lewis Pullman.

That's a high-concept plot for most movies, but small scale by Marvel standards, enough that *Thunderbolts** – even when it moves into its apocalyptic final act – more or less works as a character piece as well as an action film. It helps that the cast has charisma to burn, particularly Pugh and Sebastian Stan as Bucky Barnes, now a congressman.

Perhaps surprisingly, *Thunderbolts** is also, tacitly, a film about the current state of the MCU itself. All the big name heroes are dead or elsewhere. Almost everyone here is a less-beloved copy of an iconic hero: the second Black Widow, the failed Captain America and his Russian knockoff (David Harbour, hilarious as Red Guardian). And yet Schreier's film believes – and by its end

Even we've been on less awkward double dates.

> **"Can provide the heart the franchise has been missing"**

successfully convinces you – that not only is this gang of misfits the team that Earth-616 needs right now, but it can provide the heart the franchise has been missing.

There are flaws. We're in super-weapon territory once again, one of the MCU's stock plots. A final act move towards horror movie chills is more interesting than genuinely unsettling. Valentina is compelling, but never quite feels like a big enough threat. But despite these grumbles *Thunderbolts** hits the right balance between action, humour and genuine warmth. By the time the meaning behind that asterisk is revealed, this scrappy band of "losers" has delivered Marvel's biggest winner in quite some time. **Will Salmon**

i Schreier wanted Man-Thing to be a part of the Thunderbolts, but the character had already featured in *Werewolf By Night*.

DANGEROUS ANIMALS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 JUNE

TBC | 93 minutes

Director **Sean Byrne**

Cast **Hassie Harrison, Jai Courtney, Josh Heuston, Ella Newton**

If nothing else, Nick Lepard, writer of this serial killer thriller, deserves kudos for coming up with an original weapon of choice. Spurning machetes, chainsaws and power drills, boat trip operator Tucker (Jai Courtney) serves up his victims as a snack for sharks.

It's a winning concept, albeit one which limits the body count – it's just so much *quicker* to stab a bunch of people than go through the rigamarole of hanging them from a winch. That's a strength of the conceit though, as it give us time to develop a more substantial empathy for the latest young woman in Tucker's sights: free-spirited surfer Zephyr (Hassie Harrison), a resourceful protagonist of the sort who can pick handcuffs with a bra wire. This deepens the tension as her date with a dangle looms.

Considering the hundreds of pounds of toothy force involved, the shark attacks are slightly more restrained than gorehounds might expect. And you couldn't claim *Dangerous Animals* is wildly innovative. However, it does boast some decent plot twists, and the odd neat detail (like a smiley face on a carrier bag used for suffocation). And in-between acing speeches lionising the aquatic killers with which his character so identifies, Courtney imbues this land-based predator with a glimmer of roguish charisma. **Ian Berriman**

CLOWN IN A CORNFIELD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 96 minutes
Director **Eli Craig**
Cast **Katie Douglas, Carson MacCormac, Aaron Abrams, Kevin Durand**

Though they've never entirely vanished from the horror genre, clowns are having something of a moment. Between *Terrifier*'s Art, Pennywise haunting the *It* films and now another slash-happy slayer in *Clown In A Cornfield*, these are not good times for coulrophobes.

This latest entry into the red-nosed subgenre of scary cinema follows familiar beats. A flashback to '90s murders on a farm locale where teens are partying gives way to the tale of Quinn Maybrook (Katie Douglas) and her doctor father (Aaron Abrams) moving to a small town where highschoolers mock the local syrup company mascot. Frendo the clown is the target of their YouTube shorts, in which he's portrayed as a killer. Then kids start showing up dead.

Co-writer and director Eli Craig looks to inject some humour, and while he's never as successful as, say, *Happy Death Day*'s Christopher Landon, there is at least more going on than in your average serial killer thriller.

The only issue is, when the truth behind the clown chaos is revealed, the air somewhat starts to leave the storyline. Still, it's a decent stab, and Douglas makes for an appealing, snarky lead in a film that won't change the genre, but has fun with it. **James White**

By day two, the appeal of Glastonbury had faded.

UNTIL DAWN

Slaughter Loopy

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 103 minutes
Director **David F Sandberg**
Cast **Ella Rubin, Ji-young Yoo, Michael Cimino, Peter Stormare**

Clover and her pals embark on a road trip, visiting the site of her missing sister's last known whereabouts for closure, only to find themselves caught in someone else's twisted game. Paying a price every time they lose, their only hope of getting out of there is to survive – you guessed it – until dawn.

The 2015 PlayStation game that forms the basis for this horror flick plays like an interactive slasher, offering players the chance to either revel in or steer clear of horror tropes through their choices. Your decisions can spell an untimely demise for any and all of its caustic teens, with no save point take-backs. The videogame wants you to sit with the fallout. The movie adaptation is the complete opposite.

> **"The time-loop gimmick saps the life from this rotting husk"**

Rather than just taking place during one night, the teens here are cursed to fend for themselves through a nightmarish loop. The resulting gore is pleasingly sploshy and tactile, with a welcome practical basis to the effects throughout – there are clear loving allusions to the likes of *Evil Dead*. Alas, every death feels less gutting and more like the filmmakers hurling bloody giblets at the screen to see what sticks.

The time-loop gimmick saps the life from this rotting husk, and the teens' ties to one another are too thinly sketched to snare a more interesting trap. Even the missing sister – an initially compelling hook – is discarded like so many other rusty implements of horror movie teen torture.

By the start of the third loop, even the young 'uns appear to be flagging – and so may you. **Jess Kinghorn**

ℹ Producer Lotta Losten (director David F Sandberg's wife) cameos as a reporter seen on a TV in a witch's house.

HALLOW ROAD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 80 minutes
Director **Babak Anvari**
Cast **Rosamund Pike, Matthew Rhys, Megan McDonnell, Paul Tylak, Stephen Jones**

British-Iranian filmmaker Babak Anvari is yet to match his terrific 2016 debut *Under The Shadow*, in which an evil djinn terrorises a mother and daughter in '80s Tehran. *Hallow Road*, like *Wounds* and *I Came By*, falls short, but it's an engagingly minimalist drama that swerves into genre territory in clever ways.

Set almost entirely inside a car (and in real time, no less), William Gillies's spare script has frantic parents Maddie and Frank (Rosamund Pike and Matthew Rhys) racing towards the titular forest lane in the dead of night. On speakerphone is their daughter, Alice (Megan McDonnell), who awaits their help having hit and seemingly killed a person.

Think Steven Knight's *Locke* with a folk horror/fairy tale twist, and you're in the right lane. The acceleration into eerie territory is deftly handled by Anvari and DoP Kit Fraser, who conjure the uncanny with a few glowing lights and reflections on the windscreen. Alice's terrified descriptions – accompanied by crunchy sound effects from the speakerphone – add to the tell-don't-show methodology, while Pike and Rhys sell the escalating panic.

Some viewers will no doubt desire on-screen reveals that never come, but the scariest thing of all is very much on show: just how far parents will go to protect their child. **Jamie Graham**

MURDERBOT Season One

Life? Don't talk to him about life...

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now, Fridays**
- Creators **Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz**
- Cast **Alexander Skarsgård, Noma Dumezweni, David Dastmalchian, Tamara Podemski, Akshay Khanna, Sabrina Wu**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **If you're reading** this, you're a card-carrying sci-fi geek. And as a card-carrying sci-fi geek, we know you've wondered what happens when an android develops free will. Hell, a good many of us probably say "Thank you" to our Alexa devices, hoping to be looked upon kindly when the inevitable robot uprising begins. (Note: please don't do this – it wastes electricity and your Alexa won't remember anyway when it electrocutes your household.)

Which brings us to *Murderbot*, which has an interesting slant on the whole "android consciousness" angle: it posits that its central robot doesn't really give a stuff about us; it simply wants to be left alone to watch TV shows.

Alexander Skarsgård stars as the titular Murderbot – it chose the name itself – who manages to hack its programming to do what it wants, but has to keep its freedom a secret in case it's melted down by the corporation that owns it. Sent to a research outpost with a group of hippies, it provides security for them... while also, via a snarky voiceover, inwardly seething at how disgusting and pointless they are. Oh, and we also get to see clips from its favourite show, a *Star Trek* parody starring John Cho as a hugely-quiffed Kirk-a-like.

Adapted (with her input) from the first of Martha Wells's *Murderbot Diaries* novels by Chris and Paul Weitz, this is a broad, sitcom-style comedy with a hard edge. The violence is very, *very* violent, yet the laughs are often so stupid that they can't help but elicit a cackle of surprise.

Skarsgård is total perfection as the aloof, frustrated robot, who hates eye contact yet slowly develops a tiny fondness for the humans in its charge. And they're an unexpected delight, despite being a group of feelings-obsessed softies who should drive us mad (they click their fingers instead of clapping, for pity's sake!). Noma Dumezweni – who played the adult Hermione Granger in the West End's *Harry Potter And The Cursed Child* – is their leader, a deeply moral yet flawed character who sees more in Murderbot than just its circuits. She provides the heart, with other characters adding laughs (a tentative "throuple" trying to figure out their feelings) or drama (David Dastmalchian's augmented human, who realises something's wrong with the robot assigned to protect them).

> **"Broad, sitcom-style comedy with a hard edge"**

There's blood, guts, alien monsters, an evil conspiracy and pretty gnarly action, but somehow *Murderbot* still manages to be an adorably human story. Perhaps a little *too* much, actually – the show veers towards soppiness towards the end. But the disdainful Murderbot's bitchy narration makes any earnestness from the show's human characters infinitely more palatable. Marvin from *Hitchhiker's* would be proud. **Jayne Nelson**

i One of Martha Wells's influences was *The Silver Metal Lover*, a 1981 Tanith Lee novel about a human/robot relationship.

LIGHT & MAGIC Season Two

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
- Director **Joe Johnston**

EPISODES 2.01-2.03 **Modern day** visual effects are often flawless, but they rarely occupy the same place in your heart as stop-motion AT-ATs. This season of Disney+'s Industrial Light & Magic documentary has the same problem – as well made as it is, it's nigh-on impossible to make people staring at computers as compelling as blasting a model house with shotguns for *Poltergeist*'s finale.

Movie director and former ILMer Joe Johnston takes over from Lawrence Kasdan at the helm, but otherwise this three-part season follows the same blueprint as its predecessor. Using the *Star Wars* prequels as a loose framework, Johnston assembles the key players, and plenty of wonderful archive footage, to explain how the legendary effects studio transitioned to the digital space.

There are some intriguing revelations – the company turned down *Avatar* because they felt it was too big a risk – and also some unexpectedly powerful moments. Watching actor Ahmed Best recall how he contemplated taking his own life following the backlash against his world-first motion-capture performance as Jar Jar Binks is heartbreaking.

The star of the show, however, is once again the company's founder, George Lucas. In hindsight, he was frequently so far ahead of the curve that said curve was just a dot on a beautifully rendered CG horizon. **Richard Edwards**

THE ETERNAUT Season One

Snowed under

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Creator **Bruno Stagnaro**

Cast **Ricardo Darín, Carla Peterson, César Troncoso, Andrea Pietra**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **While some of** Netflix's foreign language dramas feel like second-tier productions, this Argentinian series matches US-made shows for the scale of its vision, and its technical prowess.

It's based on a comic strip, first serialised from 1957-1959. *El Eternauta* is an institution in its homeland, in part for the way it used elements of pulp sci-fi in the service of political allegory. The TV show retains a message that "together we are stronger".

Initially, this is a survival story, one with inevitable echoes of *The Walking Dead*. After the power goes out across Buenos Aires, a deadly snow falls, killing anyone it touches, forcing those safe inside to don masks and home-made protective suits. Early sequences of a white-shrouded Argentinean capital are eerily beautiful, with an impressive sense of scale.

Familiar questions arise: stay put, or head for an island, or a military base? Will competition for resources lead to, quote, "everyone killing each other, like in shitty TV shows"? Halfway through, it evolves into an alien invasion show, more like *Falling Skies* (remember that?). At the very end, the relevance of that title, better suited to a time travel show, starts to emerge. Each episode is a new chapter which moves things on, and provides fresh mysteries.

> **"Matches US-made shows for the scale of its vision"**

The Eternaut has a strong sense of place: card nights involve truco, not poker; characters sing songs like "Jugo De Tomate" (a 1970 track by blues-rock band Manal); its central protagonist's backstory involves serving in the Falklands War. Ricardo Darín impresses as Juan, whose PTSD makes him reluctant to pick up a weapon again – just one of many relatably flawed, authentic characters.

By the time the extended sixth episode ends, you'll probably be impatient not only to know how the story continues (a second season's been greenlit), but to hunt down Fantagraphics' collected edition of the comic. **Ian Berriman**

It's another lovely summer's day in Hull.

ℹ Héctor Germán Oesterheld, writer of the comic, was "disappeared" by the military junta that ran Argentina from 1976–1983.

THE LAST OF US Season Two

Jackson+5

★★★☆☆

UK **Sky Atlantic/streaming on NOW, Sundays**

US **HBO/streaming on Max, Sundays**

Showrunners **Craig Mazin, Neil Druckmann**

Cast **Pedro Pascal, Bella Ramsey, Isabela Merced, Young Mazino**

EPISODES 2.01-2.07 **What an** unenviable position to be in. *The Last Of Us* season one wasn't just a solid nine episodes of mushroom-zombie shooting, shanking and sizzling, but a genuinely additive adaptation of one of PlayStation's most beloved post-apocalypses.

This five years on follow-up is not only tasked with building on what came before, but adapting the extremely successful second game. Complicating matters further, while Bella Ramsey and Pedro Pascal return as a dream team, they're kept apart for much of these seven episodes. Picking up the slack are a number of fresh faces, including the charming Isabela Merced as Dina, a tempering love interest for hothead Ellie, and Kaitlyn Dever as Abby, a young woman on a parallel quest for revenge.

Ellie and Abby's stories are two sides of the same game disc, so this season honours the game's divisive structural split, focusing primarily on Ellie's arc. Despite attempts to thread in context from Abby's side of the divide, the season still feels every bit the awkward middle it was always destined to be.

The game is comfortable about not explaining itself immediately, but this season of the show takes a much less interesting approach, being downright declarative about defining character motivations. Furthermore, despite plenty of tense scraps between humans and the Infected, the pacing doesn't half shamble at times.

Like last season, it can't quite escape the post-apocalyptic genre convention of doomsday prepper nihilism, and there are even fewer reprieves from it here on the road to revenge. Still, between the often practical, blood and fungus-spattered environments and the acting talent on display, you'll be inclined to keep on truckin' into season three. **Jess Kinghorn**

"If that sub jokes about Hull again, I'll bray him."

ℹ Circa 2015, Kaitlyn Dever was lined up to play Ellie in a movie version of *The Last Of Us*, which never came to fruition.

FAMILIES LIKE OURS

The apocalypse at Scandi pace

★★★½☆

UK **BBC Four, Saturdays/streaming now on iPlayer**

Showrunner **Thomas Vinterberg**

Cast **Amaryllis August, Albert Rudbeck Lindhardt, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Paprika Steen**

EPISODES 1.01-1.07 **There's a simple,** clever, thought-provoking idea at the heart of this Danish near-future disaster series: what if the populations of traditionally prosperous, first-world western European nations are forced to become refugees?

In *Families Like Ours*, the economies of low-lying countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark can no longer sustain the cost of sea defences in the face of rising sea levels caused by global warming. The Dutch have already abandoned their homeland, and now the Danish government has declared it will be shutting down the country imminently, and its people must be relocated.

Overnight, estates become worthless, jobs vanish, and fortunes are lost. But with Europe already struggling to accommodate the Dutch, where will the Danes be welcomed?

The series, the first TV project from acclaimed Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg, concentrates on the plight of one extended and fractured family, in a series of parallel and interconnected plots. These cover characters including a gay couple, one of whom works for the government and leaks info in advance to his relatives; an aspiring child footballer with an offer from Liverpool FC; a struggling architect; and Laura, a teenager in the first flush of love.

It's not an overtly political show (in fact, the lack of politics is frustrating at times as you struggle to understand some of the decisions that have been made) preferring to concentrate on the effects the situation has on the family, and it all moves at a typically glacial Scandi-drama pace. As such, it does tend to end up as a lot of not very likeable characters making seriously dubious decisions, as misery is heaped upon misery.

With Lego gone, you'll never tread on another brick.

And yet there's also a sense of hope and human determination here – especially in Laura's continent-crossing love – that keeps you engaged and caring about what happens. It's also exquisitely filmed and beautifully acted. Denmark's loss is drama's gain. **Dave Golder**

ⓘ Originally part of the action was set in Kyiv, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced a relocation to Bucharest.

HYSTERIA!

Monsters of Rock

★★★½☆

UK **Paramount+, streaming now, Fridays**

US **Peacock, streaming now**

Creator **Matthew Scott Kane**

Cast **Emjay Anthony, Chiara Aurelia, Anna Camp, Bruce Campbell**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Heavy metal in** the '80s was, of course, a recruitment drive for Satanic cults... well, so it appeared if you were swept up in the moral panic. Hard rock became the whipping boy for all society's ills, as youngsters' minds were allegedly warped by songs with titles like "The Number Of The Beast" and "Sons Of Satan".

Hysteria! revisits those feverish times, for a supernatural high school romp that's part *Buffy*, part *The Lost Boys* and part *Stranger Things*, though not quite as good as any of them.

Three geeks have formed a heavy metal band that's had no impact on their classmates, until the lead singer decides to play up the Satanism shtick to impress a girl who likes a bit of devil worship in her life. But when a teenager is killed in what looks like a Satanic ritual the local morality police swing into action, turning the town against the band.

At the same time, increasing numbers of grown-ups are being infected by a strange disease and having visions of a winged, clawed creature. Run to the hills!

There's a lot to like in *Hysteria!* – though not the school band's dire cod-'80s death metal, of which there's way more than enough. Despite its pre-social media setting, the themes of how the masses can be manipulated into groupthink feel very relevant today, though the parallels are thankfully not laboured.

> **"Black humour, teen relationships and horror"**

For the first few episodes its combination of black humour, teen relationships and horror is well-balanced, and it boasts a great cast – including many '80s horror stalwarts such as Bruce Campbell (*Evil Dead*) and Jeffrey Combs (*Re-Animator*). But as the series progresses it becomes more overwrought and a little less fun.

Still, while it was cancelled in the US after one season, with a few minor dangling plot threads, at least there's a sense of climax and closure. **Dave Golder**

Can I play with madness? Nope, they're Dethkrunch.

ⓘ All the episode titles are named after songs by rock acts such as Def Leppard, KISS, Iron Maiden and Black Sabbath.

TALES OF THE UNDERWORLD

★★☆☆☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Dave Filoni**

Cast **Nika Futterman, Corey Burton, Artt Butler, Lane Factor**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **The latest** instalment of Disney+'s animated anthology series (following *Tales Of The Jedi* and *Tales Of The Empire*) focuses on a pair of fan-favourite villains from *The Clone Wars*. This time, however, it rarely feels worth the effort, as the two story arcs add little to the mythos of the characters involved.

The return of reformed Sith assassin Asajj Ventress (Nika Futterman) is liable to confuse all but the most hardcore fans, as her doomed romance with former Jedi Quinlan Vos (and death) actually took place in a novel, *Dark Disciple*. With this unseen backstory integral to the plot, her resurrection (thanks to some Force hocus-pocus) and subsequent story of redemption (transporting a fugitive Jedi to safety) will mean little to the majority of viewers – especially with the action served up in brief, quarter-hour episodes that leave little room for character growth.

Meanwhile, bounty hunter Cad Bane's (Corey Burton) prequel arc heads in the opposite direction, as a street kid is seduced by the criminal life. The episodes have fun riffing on Bane's Western inspirations, referencing *Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid* as he spars with childhood friend-turned-lawman Niro (Artt Butler). But, as was always the case with Boba Fett, Bane's biography is definitely a case of less is more. **Richard Edwards**

Everyone paused as they called time in Wetherspoons.

ASTERIX & OBELIX: THE BIG FIGHT

SFX Loves

Armorica the brave

★★★★★

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Directors **Alain Chabat, Fabrice Joubert**

Cast **Alain Chabat, Gilles Lellouche, Anaïs Demoustier, Thierry Lhermitte**

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 **For a half-pint** hero, Asterix has a pretty outsized screen presence. Over the years Goscinny and Uderzo's Roman-twatting Gaul warrior has inspired countless movies and a 52-episode TV series. Now we can add a CG-animated Netflix serial – one that might just have perfected the magic adaptation potion.

Co-directed and co-written by Alain Chabat, who made *Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra* a live-action hit in 2002, it's based on *Le Combat Des Chefs*, the seventh book in the series. As ever, Rome is plotting to overthrow the last pocket of Gaulish resistance, this time by invoking a ritual of tribal combat. It should be an easy win for the villagers but Getafix, their resident Gandalf/Walter White, is incapacitated, clonked on the noggin by a pesky menhir...

Episode one is mainly prequel – *Obelix Begins*, essentially – but the series hits its stride with episode two, adding cinematic scope to the original tale (the title bout now takes place in a vast amphitheatre) along with a sprinkling of updated satire, taking aim at everything from Marvel to oily marketing gurus.

The animation sees the French go pixel to pixel with Pixar, creating worlds rich in texture and detail. And there's a visual inventiveness reminiscent of the *Spider-Verse* movies: the recovering Getafix hallucinates Asterix as a scrappy piece of pre-vis footage.

Mixing slapstick and sight gags with a pinch of *Monty Python*, it's riotously entertaining stuff, true to the wit, charm and anarchy Goscinny and Uderzo brought to 50BC. **Nick Setchfield**

i The voice cast for the English dub includes *This Country*'s Daisy May Cooper and *Bridgerton*'s Ruby Barker.

WONDLA

Season Two

★★★½☆

UK/US **Apple+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Bobs Gannaway**

Cast **Jeanine Mason, Gary Anthony Williams, Ana Villafañe, Alan Tudyk**

EPISODES 2.01-2.07 **If you're** familiar with the meme that declares "Hang it in the Louvre!" below a pretty image, you may find yourself applying it to certain moments from this futuristic animated series' second season. A giant moth glittering in the sunshine, for example, the animators' work surely worthy of a spot beside the Mona Lisa. Or the geometric hallucinations experienced by one character.

For all its lush colours and expensive-looking design, however, *WondLa*'s second season suffers from routine plotting and over-familiar tropes. Teenager Eve (Jeanine Mason) has found other humans in a city led by the too-good-to-be-true Cadmus Pryde (Alan Tudyk). As she realises city life might not be for her – and some kids watching might not realise their lifestyle is being mocked – Eve runs into an older version of herself, Eve 8 (Ana Villafañe), and is drawn into a resistance group.

It's all a bit humdrum, saved only by the comic stylings of giant caterpillar Otto (Brad Garrett) and the aforementioned prettiness. The show's Apple aesthetic, all sleek white technology, is starting to feel a little post-*WALL-E* dated, though. A cliffhanger ending means a third season is a must, but is there really anything new for this story to say?

That moth, though. Wow. **Jayne Nelson**

"I should probably put the visor down on this helmet."

STRANGE NEW WORLDS

Mission To Marx

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1960-1976 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Gottfried Kolditz, Kurt Maetzig, Herrmann Zschoche**

Cast **Günther Simon, Piotr Pawłowski, Cox Habbema, Jana Brejchová**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Say "German** science fiction movie", and chances are you think of silents like *Metropolis* and *Frau Im Mond*. In recent years, the studio where both were filmed – Babelsburg, in Potsdam – has paid host to the likes of *The Matrix Resurrections*. But in the post-war period, it spent 45 years as the HQ of DEFA, East Germany's state-owned production company. This fascinating box set collects four SF features made under its auspices, showcasing a different take on the genre: one that spurns catastrophic Hollywood takes in favour of more utopian, pacifist, internationalist visions.

A trip to Venus in the tradition of films like *Destination: Moon*, 1960's *The Silent Star* (based on a Stanisław Lem novel) is notable in two respects. The Kosmokrator 1's multiracial crew predates Captain Kirk's by six years – though it's worth noting that "the African member of the crew" (as he's described) is relegated to tasks like reading a countdown. Uhura would no doubt sympathise.

But the film's main appeal is its borderline lysergic depiction of the Venusian planet surface,

> **"The director clearly took notes during 2001"**

which, with its Salvador Dali-esque glass forest, lava lamp sky and glittering black dust, is so far out as to overshadow the "Atomic war is bad, m'kay?" message.

Charting a mission to locate a lost ship, the key influence of 1970's *Signals: A Space Adventure* is self-evident. Director Gottfried Kolditz clearly took notes during *2001: A Space Odyssey* when a flight attendant walked up the wall and Keir Dullea jogged in circles – it feels like half the screen time is spent on weightless rotation. A ponderous affair – even doors slide open frustratingly slowly – it's of principle interest for the way it reflects Kubrick's influence.

Eolomea (1972) opens promisingly, as a vast committee discusses the disappearance of eight spacecraft: a compelling hook. But the eventual explanation is infuriatingly anticlimactic, and en route far too much time is spent on flashbacks to two key players' romantic past. A lovably wobbly robot is some compensation.

The one entry that could become a cult item is 1976's *In The Dust Of The Stars*. After answering a distress call, a spaceship crew discovers that the aliens who greeted them (clearly decadent bourgeois types) are actually colonialist invaders exploiting the indigenous workers.

Eccentric production design makes this an irresistibly campy affair. Delights include chiffon-clad dancers with Toyah eye make-up, a buffet where pythons slither around iced doughnuts, and a chief baddie who intermittently has his bonce aerosol-sprayed a different colour. Think *Space: 1999* if Gerry Anderson had been a card-carrying communist.

Extras This Eureka Masters Of Cinema release makes good use of academics versed in German and Soviet cinema. Cumulatively, two interviews (24/32 minutes) and a video essay (15 minutes) clue you in on DEFA's history, and how the films relate to things such as the doctrine of Socialist realism and the German nudist movement Freikörperkultur.

There are three shorts, two of them animated. "The Robot" (15 minutes, 1968) supplies cute comedy, as the titular creation runs amok. The pretty "Jana And The Little Star" (15 minutes, 1971) sees a girl trying to help a fallen star get home. "Love 2002" (25 minutes, 1972) opens with a lurid *Brave New World*-esque vision of computerised dating, but it's just the lead-in to pointless vox-pops.

The Silent Star is accompanied by two brief newsreels, while *Eolomea* and *In The Dust Of The Stars* both come with 2005 retrospectives. The former (19 minutes) interviews the costume designer (who shows off her spacesuit sketches) and two effects boffins (who discuss the problems of hanging models by piano wire). The latter (16 minutes) quizzes the DoP.

All four films receive academic commentaries. Plus: trailers; a 60-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i A dubbed edit of *The Silent Star* titled *First Spaceship On Venus* saw release in the US. References to Hiroshima were cut.

BIRDEATER

Bachelor Boys

★★★★☆

RELEASED 26 MAY
2024 | 15 | Download
Directors **Jack Clark, Jim Weir**
Cast **Mackenzie Fearnley, Shabana Azeez, Ben Hunter, Jack Bannister**

Male rage and fragility is at the heart of this stylish, horror-tinged thriller about the bachelor party from Hell.

Louie (Mackenzie Fearnley) and Irene (Shabana Azeez) embark on a whirlwind romance – skilfully conveyed with a wordless montage. Some time later, following a mysterious accident, the couple are engaged but all is clearly not well.

Hoping to fix things (or perhaps to keep her close), Louie invites Irene to join his stag party: an ill-advised getaway in the Outback in which dark secrets and hidden tensions will be revealed.

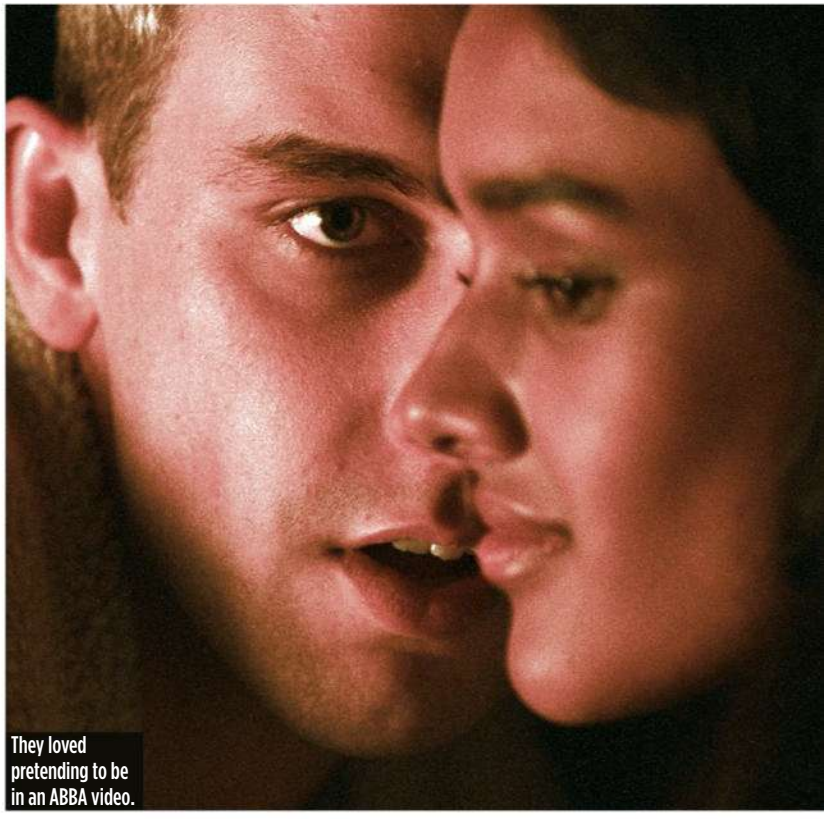
A glimpse of a poster for the 1971 film *Wake In Fright* early on braces the eagle-eyed viewer for a brutal study in Australian masculinity, but *Birdeater* is more elusive than Ted Kotcheff's classic. Still, there's an ever-present sense of threat here, particularly from Dylan (Ben Hunter), a ticking time bomb who explodes in an excruciating dinner party scene.

As the film progresses it becomes clear that none of these sad, bad, profoundly broken men is in the clear – indeed Louie may be the most troubling of all.

It's an effective debut from directors Jack Clark and Jim Weir, one that skirts cliché in favour of something subtler and more unnerving.

Will Salmon

i The filmmakers endured a flooded set and the budget running out mid-shoot – until a new investor saved the project.



They loved pretending to be in an ABBA video.

NOMADS

Restless spirits

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 26 MAY
1986 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **John McTiernan**
Cast **Pierce Brosnan, Lesley-Anne Down, Anna Maria Monticelli**

BLU-RAY DEBUT ***Die Hard* director** John McTiernan's feature debut is an '80s horror better bracketed with, say, *Jacob's Ladder* than *A Nightmare On Elm Street*.

Pierce Brosnan plays a French anthropologist. Yes, he attempts the accent; yes, you may grit your teeth. The character dies a few moments in, with his story then unfolding in flashbacks – some from the point of view of an ER doctor (Lesley-Anne Down) who's somehow acquired a head full of his memories.

An expert on nomadic tribes, Brosnan grew obsessed with the urban jungle's equivalent: a gang of punky drifters who don't show up in photos. A phone call to Professor Exposition eventually connects this to an Inuit legend.

Nomads' structural novelty is just one thing that sets it apart. It has a vaguely European sensibility, with some interesting ideas lurking under the surface, though these remain somewhat inchoate: the notion that LA is a "rootless city"; bourgeois life's alienation from something more vital. Its main issue is that the mute Nomads (who include Adam Ant) aren't especially intimidating, resembling a neatly styled bunch of extras from a Bon Jovi video. And the accompanying squalls of '80s *rawwwk* (courtesy of Ted Nugent) are fingers-in-ears naff.

Extras This Treasured Films restoration has three new bonuses. In the commentary, McTiernan proves to be so terse that you begin to pre-emptively wince on the moderator's behalf – though the director does give interesting answers to those few questions deemed adequate. Pierce Brosnan declares himself pleasantly surprised by how the film's stood up (nine minutes). Then there's the de rigueur Kim Newman talking head (13 minutes).

> **"Its structural novelty is just one thing that sets it apart"**

In interviews from 2015's US release, Lesley-Anne Down (16 minutes) claims she was miscast, and composer Bill Conti (17 minutes) recalls how the music was – in a break from his usual practice – improvised in the studio. Plus: trailer; radio spot; gallery; six art cards; booklet.

Ian Berriman

i Early on, in a hospital scene, a PA voice calls for Dr Benway – a character from William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*.

"I'd recommend the full wet shave."

It's one way to draw attention to your eyes.

TERROR IN THE FOG

Mist opportunities

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 26 MAY

1963/1964 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Franz Josef Gottlieb, Edwin Zbonek, Harald Reinl**

Cast **Joachim Fuchsberger, Karin Dor, Hansjörg Felmy, Marianne Koch**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Dripping** atmosphere and trailing corpses, the krimi movie flourished in West Germany in the '60s. Adapting the work of British crime writer Edgar Wallace, these potboilers prowled the margin between thriller and horror, all masked maniacs, twisty plots and gothic trimmings. Many claim them as an inspiration for the Italian giallo.

This five-film box set (subtitle: *The Wallace Krimi At CCC*) sees producer Artur Brauner exploiting the popular appeal of the Wallace brand by cutting a deal with the writer's son, Bryan Edgar Wallace, himself a novelist. It was more a canny marketing exercise than a creative collaboration, but the results still distil the essence of the genre. Krimi's world of lamplit, rain-slicked alleys and fogbound rural retreats is more evocative than ever in these restorations.

Essentially a Grand Guignol whodunit, *The Strangler Of Blackmoor Castle* trades in decapitated heads and secret passages as a killer strikes among sherry-quaffing aristos in a country pile ("He comes and goes like a ghost!"). *The Monster Of London City*, meanwhile, updates the well-worn Jack the Ripper myth as an actor playing the fiend on stage finds himself implicated in a new spate of killings. Thick with nocturnal ambience, it's just a little short on genuine suspense.

> **"Prowls the margin of thriller and horror"**

The least horror-adjacent offering here, despite the presence of a horse named Satan, *The Racetrack Murders* plays like a particularly homicidal Dick Francis yarn. *The Curse Of The Yellow Snake* also feels something of an outlier, given its pulpy premise of a hunt for a mystical serpent statue that grants the power to "win any war or battle". It's middling stuff, with an awkward touch of Fu Manchu-style yellowface, but there are flashes of true cinematic spectacle and some Cold War spy-flick tension as our hero infiltrates a secret Chinese base.

It's up to *The Mad Executioners* to lean full-tilt into the ghoulish. Here, a secret court of hooded judges convenes in skull-filled catacombs, meting out vigilante justice. Meanwhile, a serial killer terrorises the nation by chopping off the heads of young women. These macabre plot strands never entirely cohere, but the film doesn't care. It's too busy making a final act swerve into a whole other genre altogether.

As with all these movies, the thrills are intermittent, but the mood is everything. Savour the sight of that horse-drawn hearse rattling into a mist-shrouded cemetery. A dark dream of England, made in Berlin.

Extras Consigned to the extras because there's no high-definition source available, *The Phantom Of Soho* proves one of the stronger films in this set, an absorbing tale of a golden-gloved killer striking in London's red light district, captured in all its squalid glamour by master cinematographer Richard Angst.

Video Watchdog's Tim Lucas provides an overview of the krimi genre (six minutes) and introduces each film, bringing a depth of knowledge that not only illuminates the movies, but traces the connections between them (averages 10 minutes apiece). A video essay by critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas makes a good case for krimi's influence on slasher cinema and also has some intriguing thoughts on the genre's meta aspects (18 minutes), while an engaging interview with Alice Brauner, daughter of producer Artur Brauner (10 minutes), is upfront about the films' creative origins: "The whole Bryan Edgar Wallace deal was primarily about the name. Of course it was."

Each movie also gets an audio commentary from a pool of genre experts that includes Kim Newman, Kevin Lyons and Jonathan Rigby, and what's essentially an extra commentary teams Tim Lucas with *Swamp Thing* comic book artist Stephen Bissette to share their takes on the genre in general. Plus: trailers; optional English dubs; a 60-page booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

The Strangler Of Blackmoor Castle's Karin Dor also played SPECTRE operative Helga Brandt in *You Only Live Twice*.

THE ASSESSMENT

Child unfriendly

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 18+ | SVOD

Director **Fleur Fortuné**

Cast **Alicia Vikander, Elizabeth Olsen, Himesh Patel, Indira Varma**

PRIME VIDEO **Fleur Fortuné's** assured debut feature reveals its dystopian horrors detail by chilling detail.

This is a future in which smart home tech calmly monitors radiation levels, where pets have been brutally culled, and children are a precious commodity, rationed by the state. Like all prospective parents, Mia and Aaryan (Elizabeth Olsen and Himesh Patel) must undergo a methodical evaluation by a government official – the assessment of the title.

Enter Alicia Vikander's Virginia. At first she's a creepily aloof presence in their home, asking the awkward questions ("Do you achieve regular climax?") and observing their sex life with just a hint of professional voyeurism. But when she begins to roleplay as their daughter the mind games escalate, testing and fracturing the couple's relationship.

Virginia's soon revealed as a cuckoo in the nest, a manipulative, destabilising trickster, and Vikander plays her dark mischief brilliantly, summoning a brattish physicality that's far removed from the cool, buttoned-down figure we first encounter.

Ultimately showing us a world shaped by hard, terrible choices, this is an emotionally literate, powerfully acted piece of future shock. **Nick Setchfield**

ℹ No wooden furniture was used in the sets, with the aim of subliminally suggesting that no forests remain in this future.

"I'm sorry, you want us to do what now?"

DICK DYNAMITE: 1944

★☆☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

The best we can say for this microbudget horror-comedy is that it looks like everyone had fun: larking about in fields, swearing enthusiastically, doing terrible German accents.

However, Nazi zombies are such a cliché at this point that there's no shock value left in the concept, and it has nothing else to offer. You'd have to find the word "dick" hilarious to even wring a chuckle out of it.

Extras Commentary; Making Of; deleted scenes; much more. **Sarah Dobbs**

DIMENSION SLIP

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 12 | Download

Parallel worlds converge as office drone Kate experiences visions that reveal another life to her, one where she's an executive named Hannah. Exchanging realities with her doppelgänger, she finds herself hunting a killer.

What promises to be a thriller take on *Sliding Doors* is undone by some baggy storytelling and a lack of true tension. A convenient multiversal expert pops up to supply the exposition, ripely played as a cross between Terry Pratchett and a Poundland Doctor Who. **Nick Setchfield**

SCREAMBOAT

★☆☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

There are lots of reasons to dislike Disney, and lots of ways to poke fun at its empire of plasticky magic. Unfortunately, the makers of this campy slasher set on the Staten Island ferry got as far as "What if Mickey Mouse was a serial killer?" and called it a day.

Half-formed ideas (like dressing a gaggle of drunk girls as princesses) butt up against splattery practical effects and juvenile humour in service of an extremely basic stalk 'n' slash plotline, but there's no point to it, no real inspiration.

Extras Featurette. **Sarah Dobbs**

IT FEEDS

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Download

If therapy was as easy as having someone psychically yank your trauma out of your head, no one would have any issues ever again.

Unfortunately, in this supernatural chiller, some of clairvoyant-cum-therapist Cynthia's problems go beyond mental health. Some of them are fighting *literal* demons.

The monster design is creepy (basically the *Insidious* guy, minus his lipstick) but the saggy script saps him of his impact. There's no anchor to reality, no heart, so it all sadly falls flat. **Sarah Dobbs**

ORLANDO

The Woolf Man/Woman

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 2 JUNE

1992 | PG | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Sally Potter**

Cast **Tilda Swinton, Billy Zane, Lothaire Bluteau, John Wood**

In a time when the question of whether sex can be mutable is a hot-button topic, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* has probably never been more topical. Her 1928 novel recounts the life of an aristocrat who lives, unageing, for hundreds of years, transforming from a man to a woman along the way.

There's an appealing lightness of touch to Sally Potter's take on the material, which sees Tilda Swinton (who else?), as the hero, glancing at or speaking to the camera over a dozen times. While Orlando's switch of sex does occasion some discussion of women's second-class status, as Swinton observes in the extras this is a film with broader themes: loneliness, boundarylessness, and the impermanence of all things.

Orlando was made on a shoestring, and at times – like an encounter with a steam train, conveyed through sound effects and dry ice – that becomes a bit obvious. But its playful casting (Quentin Crisp portrays Elizabeth I; Jimmy Somerville a singing angel) is wryly amusing. Its sumptuous costuming always impresses. And a dash through a hedge maze which transports us from 1750 to 1850 makes ingenious use of the magic of editing.

Extras Curzon's dual-format edition carries over most bonuses from prior releases. A video diary on filming in Uzbekistan (52 minutes) speaks to everyone from Potter to the guy in charge of the latrine pits, and is refreshingly candid about the financial challenges. Another fascinating piece (34 minutes) recounts trips to the Perestroika-era USSR.

Other archival features: a Potter/Swinton commentary; a peek at dangling Somerville from a crane (eight minutes); a press conference (24 minutes); a Potter interview (14 minutes); discussion of several scenes (11 minutes). The newest thing's an engaging Potter/Swinton Zoom chat (2022, 20 minutes). You also get two Potter shorts: 1979's "Thriller" and 1986's "The London Story" (32/16 minutes). Plus: location scouting video (12 minutes), with Potter dashing around that maze; two minutes of Crisp's memories; booklet; script; poster. **Ian Berriman**

"So... how much conditioner do *you* use?"

i The welcome Potter got from a local mayor inspired a scene where Orlando gets tipsy trying to match an Uzbek ruler.

THE IRON ROSE

A grave situation

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 26 MAY

1973 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Jean Rollin**

Cast **Françoise Pascal, Hugues Quester, Nathalie Perrey**

For his fifth feature, cult French filmmaker Jean Rollin set aside the vampires usually featured in his work for something more abstract and psychological.

In *The Iron Rose*, a courting couple on a bike ride pay a visit to a cemetery, canoodling in a tomb. Emerging when night has fallen, they find themselves inexplicably trapped: whichever way they run, they cannot locate the exit. Their rising panic slips into irrationality, with the girl (Françoise Pascal) growing increasingly entranced by the realm of the dead.

It's an interesting departure for the director, though given the scarcity of narrative incident some may question if the conceit really has the legs for anything of greater duration than a short film.

Still, the gothic majesty of the overgrown cemetery – all ivy–wrapped monuments and rusty railings – makes it an atmospheric setting, and the film has some memorably odd scenes, notably a moment of morbid eroticism where the disordered lovers clinch in a pit scattered with human bones: sex and death intertwined.

Extras Françoise Pascal is the star of this Indicator release, interviewed in 2012 and 2018: the former (23 minutes) concentrates on this film; the latter (24 minutes) surveys a career that saw her work with Jean-Luc Godard and Peter Sellers (plus *Penthouse*!). She's good-humoured in both, praising Rollin for listening to her ideas. In the newest feature, film historian Stephen Thrower (32 minutes) delivers a well-argued appreciation of the film's skill at conveying texture. Further archival pieces include two brief clips of the director (six minutes), and three Rollin collaborators discussing the shoot (16 minutes).

Rollin's first short "The Yellow Loves" (11 minutes, 1958) weds a dramatic reading of poet Tristan Corbière with visuals of the beach near Dieppe that recurs across his oeuvre. *Video Watchdog*'s Tim Lucas provides well-informed commentary, locating metaphoric meaning in things as simple as a quilted skirt... Plus: an English dub; gallery; trailers; an 80-page booklet (contents include Rollin's original scenario). **Ian Berriman**

"L'amour et la mort, n'est-ce pas la même chose ?"

i Before her acting career took off, star Françoise Pascal worked for a time as a podium dancer for *Top Of The Pops*.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Captain America: Brave New World* • *Flow* • *Giants Of La Mancha* • *Heart Eyes* • *In The Lost Lands* *Opus* • *September Says* (MUBI) • *The Woman In The Yard* • *The Ugly Stepsister*

SEEDPEOPLE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1992 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Peter Manoogian**

Cast **Sam Hennings, Andrea Roth, Dane Witherspoon, Bernard Kates**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **"Based on an** original idea by Charles Band," declares an opening credit – ironically, given that *Seedpeople* doesn't possess such a thing.

As the title suggests, it's a riff on *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*. There are echoes of Don Siegel's film throughout, from a framing device which sees its hero recounting events to an FBI agent to scenes of mind-controlled locals loading giant seeds onto a truck.

As Tom Baines, the double-denimed geologist returning to rural Comet Valley, Sam Hennings (think own-brand Peter Weller) makes for an underwhelming lead, and the film has numerous logic gaps and other shortcomings, from the young girl clearly played by a 21-year-old to the "digging" extras gingerly poking the soil.

But it's goofy fun, thanks to the outlandish alien life cycle. This involves a weird bloom resembling a hairy vulva, that hoses victims with seminal goo... End result: three variant combos of fangs, mandibles and tentacles. All would make good novelty pencil-toppers.

Extras A period Making Of (10 minutes) is the highlight of this 88 Films release, thanks to footage of an alien that rolls along like *Critters*' Krites being pulled by a remote-control car! Band experts Dave Wain and Matty Budrewicz's potty-mouthed commentary is short on discussion of what's actually happening on-screen. Plus: trailer; poster. **Ian Berriman**

Pillow case with hole torn in it model's own.

CASTLE FREAK

Inheritance attacks

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 26 MAY

1995 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Stuart Gordon**

Cast **Jeffrey Combs, Barbara Crampton, Jonathan Fuller**

A grim riff on gothic which swaps a deformed lunatic in a dungeon for the madwoman in the attic, *Castle Freak* was a "getting the gang back together" outing for *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond* director Stuart Gordon, reuniting him with stars Jeffrey Combs and Barbara Crampton. It takes the bronze medal position.

After unexpectedly inheriting a sprawling Italian castle, Coombs's character moves in his family while it's prepared for sale. Unbeknown to them, the elderly duchess who previously lived there secretly had a son, whom she imprisoned and abused for decades. Quite how said "freak" got by without food, or being found, and only now manages to barge down the door of his cell, are just three troubling questions.

Castle Freak is more realist than its two outlandish, overtly comic Lovecraftian predecessors, although such things are relative: in the bonuses, it's described as "mature" and "sophisticated", but it's still a film where a prostitute has her nipple bitten off...

Still, the dysfunctional family's tragic backstory (dad crashed his car, killing their young son) does hand the leads brief opportunities to prove that they can pass muster as serious actors, with Crampton especially impressive.

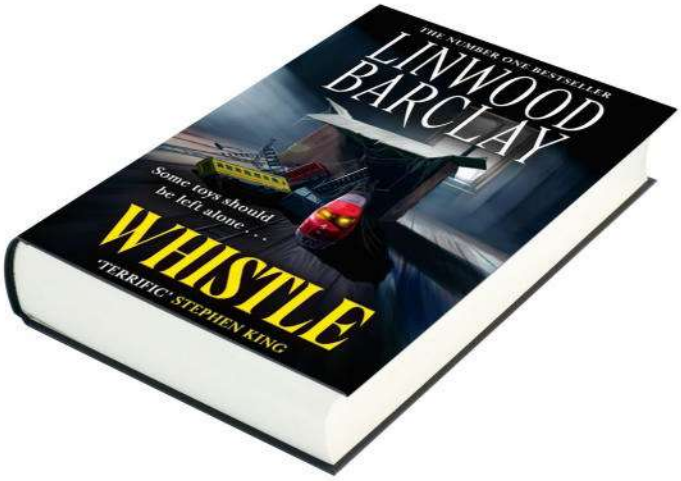
Extras Across three new interviews for this 101 Films release, composer Richard Band (19 minutes) talks of bonding with Gordon over Frank Zappa, and Barbara Crompton recalls devising ghost stories on location, while ex *Fangoria* editor Chris Alexander provides an appreciation.

Cat wrangling and brains application feature in a period Making Of (12 minutes). Another archival feature sees a tuxedoed William Shatner prodding Gordon and his leads into an awkward chat about the paranormal (15 minutes) for an intro to a 2002 TV airing. Plus: a short interview with Gordon (eight minutes); trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

Castle Freak was one of several films shot in Castello di Giove, Italy – owned by producer Charles Band from 1985-2014.

ROUND UP

In **CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), Sam Wilson must untangle a plot to discredit new US president Thaddeus Ross (Harrison Ford). We said: "A film trying so hard to ape *The Winter Soldier* that it can't help look lesser by comparison." Bonuses: director/DOP commentary; two featurettes; deleted scenes; gag reel. *Freaky*'s Christopher Landon and Michael Kennedy co-wrote **HEART EYES** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), in which a serial killer who murders lovers mistakes a guy and a gal for a couple. We said: "A snarky, mostly fresh spin on the combination of romance and horror." Bonuses: director's commentary, Making Of; five deleted scenes; gag reel. Based on a George RR Martin story, Paul WS Anderson's **IN THE LOST LANDS** (2 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) teams Dave Bautista's gunslinger with Milla Jovovich's badass witch, tasked with finding a werewolf in the titular wastelands. We said: "Just an excuse for Anderson to let Jovovich and Bautista loose on a variety of baddies." Bonuses: nada. In Bong Joon Ho's **MICKEY 17** (26 May, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) Robert Pattinson is a "disposable" on a colonising mission – printed out every time he dies on a dangerous job. A mix-up leads to two Mickeys co-existing. We said: "A broad, blunt satire brimming with absurdity... never digs deep into its central concept." Extras: Three featurettes. Finally, the latest TV box sets are **DOOM PATROL** Season Four (out now, DVD) and **OUTLANDER** Season Seven (26 May, Blu-ray/DVD).



WHISTLE

Blood On The Tracks

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 JUNE
384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Linwood Barclay**
Publisher **HQ**

In the acknowledgements to Linwood Barclay's terrific new novel *Whistle*, some chap called Stephen King gets a "special thank you" for reading a first draft and being "encouraging from the get-go". On one level, this is just a personal and professional courtesy, and yet it's perhaps also revealing. Obviously, King remains *the* horror master. If he rates the novel, it might be pretty good. More subtly, King's evocations of the Eastern seaboard of the USA invariably find the mysterious in the everyday, which is exactly what Barclay tries to do here.

On which subject, what could be more mundane than a toy train set? To employ a word that's hated by Edwin Nabler, proprietor of Choo-Choo's Trains, model railways are *cute*. Except, that is, when they're built or modified by Nabler, who manifests in human form but, it's probably not giving away too much to say, is a creature altogether stranger.

All of this gradually becomes clear over a novel that plays out over two timelines. The first is set in the present day. It features bestselling children's author Annie Blunt, whose privileged New York City life unravels in the wake of two tragedies, when her husband is killed in a hit-and-run accident and a child dies after taking something she wrote too literally.

Annie needs to escape from the immediate past and, with the help of her publisher, moves to an attractive small town in upstate New York. It's here that her young, lonely son, Charlie, finds an old model railway in a shed and simultaneously becomes obsessed with cycling around on a thrift store bicycle. No, this clearly isn't going to end well...

Why it won't is made clear during passages set in 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks. In the town of Lucknow, Vermont, Edwin Nabler has just set up shop. His train sets are beautifully crafted, intricate and fascinating. He doesn't have many customers, but he's a good salesman. If they don't walk out with a set, those who wander into his store tend to return to make a purchase.

At which point bad things start happening, because Nabler is an artist when it comes to conjuring up ill fortune, and his chosen medium is those toy trains. Can he be stopped?

First, it has to be proved he's doing wrong, a job that falls to the town's police chief, Harry Cook. It's Cook who starts to link a series of disappearances and tragic events to Nabler, but he's a good cop hamstrung both by the sheer weirdness of what's happening and by the fact that America's attention is elsewhere, on the threat posed by Al Qaeda.

Jumping between two different time periods, Barclay gradually establishes links between his two narratives. In terms of its plotting, *Whistle* is one of those novels in which timelines converge so elegantly that it's only after you have finished the book that you start to reflect on those moments when the author has done a certain amount of hand-waving to distract you from, say, musing too long on how Nabler actually came to be.

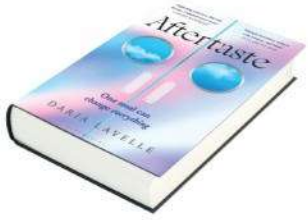
> **"Writhing nastiness and picket fences existing adjacent to each other"**

Still, there's much more here to like than there is to criticise. In particular, Barclay is brilliant at evoking small-town America but then twisting it so there's a Lynchian sense of writhing nastiness and white picket fences existing adjacent to each other. And Barclay is also more than up to the task of making model trains appear scary as hell. Suffice to say the words "chuff chuff chuff chuff chuff" become a kind of dark mantra.

Finally, as in so many of King's best novels, there's a sense of bad things happening to good people, which makes it easy to root for the central characters here. Linwood Barclay has long had a reputation as a thriller writer who delivers crisp prose and twisting plots. Should he wish it, a parallel career as a horror writer awaits.

Jonathan Wright

i Linwood Barclay says his favourite Stephen King novel is *Pet Sematary*. "If you've had kids... it really hits home."



AFTERTASTE

★★★★½

RELEASED 22 MAY
400 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Daria Lavelle**
Publisher **Bloomsbury**

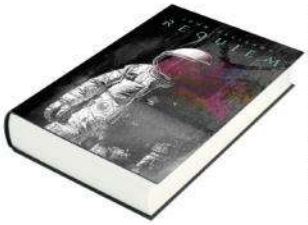
There aren't many books reviewed in *SFX* that arrive with a glowing quote from Nigella Lawson ("A hauntingly evocative journey," she coos). That's because *Aftertaste* focuses on two things: food – in exquisite, mouth-watering detail – and ghosts.

From the age of 11, New Yorker Kostya has been able to taste "ghost" food: a vivid sensation in the back of his throat that appears whenever a spirit is near. Is it a reminder of their final meal? A happy memory projected from their ghostly subconscious? Or is it a plea for help?

Kostya learns to ignore these phantom aftertastes, but the ghosts attached to them are growing more insistent. As he starts a relationship with Maura, a troubled psychic, Kostya must juggle the stress of opening his own restaurant with the growing knowledge that something is very wrong in the afterlife.

Debut author Daria Lavelle has distilled the tension of *The Bear* with the descriptive floweriness of *Perfume: The Story Of A Murderer*, then played with snappy, pacy prose and fascinating psychology. Okay, so Maura reads like a Manic Pixie Dream Girl and credulity is stretched in 50 different ways by the final act, but these tiny niggles don't matter. This is a fun, thoughtful exploration of grief, love and the nature of hunger. Feast upon its pages.

Jayne Nelson



REQUIEM

★★★★☆

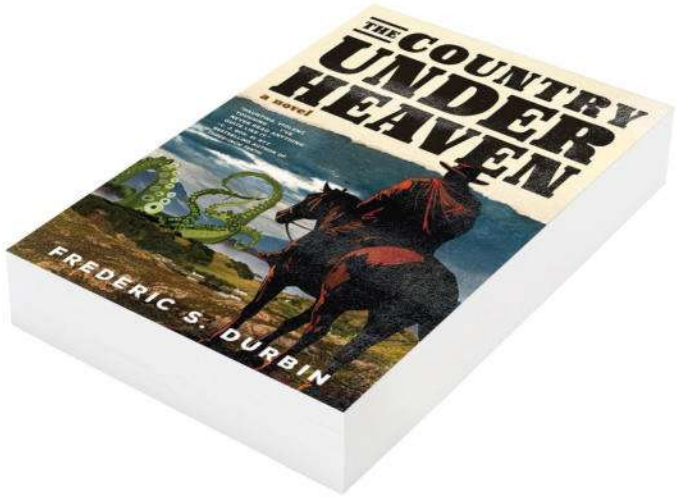
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
256 pages | **Hardback/ebook**
Author **John Palisano**
Publisher **Flame Tree Press**

Some sci-fi concepts just seem like bad ideas. Even before anything goes wrong, the idea of building a moon-sized cemetery in space should raise some red flags. The ironically named "Eden" houses thousands of glass coffins, displaying the dead from orbit so that their loved ones can look at the sky and remember. Creepy? It gets worse.

At the start of this cosmic horror, Eden's systems have already malfunctioned once, leaking toxic embalming juices and disintegrating bodies all over the place. It's the job of Captain Ava Armstrong to make sure everything's working – and, with composer Tessa Nightingale on board, generate some positive publicity by writing a new requiem to help people forget the disaster. None of it sounds like a good idea, and every chapter ratchets up the dread as the crew is beset by new horrors.

Despite its compact size, *Requiem* packs a lot of ideas – proper existential ones, at that. The Eden station has its own AI; the crew includes an artificial "Humani" android; the memories of the dead are also harvested and maintained by computers. With all those consciousnesses floating about, what does it mean to be alive? Or have a soul?

It's a quick read, and the actual plot is straightforward enough, but the troubling questions *Requiem* raises about (im)mortality will stick with you. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE COUNTRY UNDER HEAVEN

SFX Loves ★★★★★

Lovecraftian Tales Of The West

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
328 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Frederic S Durbin**
Publisher **Melville House**

Eldritch nightmares meet the Western in Frederic Durbin's engaging genre mash-up. In the aftermath of the American Civil War, ex-Union soldier Ovid Vesper is haunted by memories of bloody battlefields that drive him to wander the country in search of something he can't quite name, while experiencing strange visions that guide him to encounters with the uncanny.

The hero's name hints at the mythic quality of the novel, and Ovid's odyssey across the deserts of the Old West is told in an episodic format as the storytelling pulls in everything from a dragon sleeping under the mountains to aliens, cattle drives, and high noon shootouts in dusty frontier towns.

These divergent motifs are tied together not just by Ovid's sanguine presence as the narrator, but by a unifying theme about the scars left by violence, whether they take the form of the destruction wrought on the landscape by a tornado, the psychological toll of taking a life, or the Civil War. One character is memorably described as someone who "had gone into the War with everything a man could want and come out of it with nothing".

Ovid's restless travels seem born of a desire to escape the dark shadows of the past, both his own unwanted recollections of killing for his country and the unhealed rupture that the conflict has left in the nation's psyche. The protagonist's guilt is represented by a being called the Craither (derived from the Irish word for creature), which lurks at the edges of his consciousness, forever just out of sight, draining his very life energy.

Despite the horrors – human and very much otherwise – that Ovid encounters, Durbin allows rays of sunshine to penetrate the menacing storm clouds that hang heavy over the horizon, asserting that even in the aftermath of terror, hope endures.

David West

i Durbin positions Ovid as a survivor of the Battle Of Antietam of September 1862, the bloodiest day in American history.

THE KNIGHT AND THE MOTH

★★★☆☆

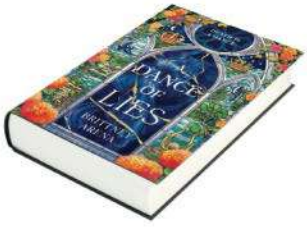
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
400 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Rachel Gillig**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

To be a woman is to be a vessel of pain. In *The Knight And The Moth*, this doesn't just mean periods and childbirth, but being drowned each day to receive celestial visions.

Rachel Gillig creates a delectably gothic fantasy world, where girls are chosen to become Diviners. Cut off from the outside world, they experience violently wrought prophecies in exchange for coin. Six is our protagonist, a Diviner stripped of name and identity who's forced to leave her cloister when her sisters begin to disappear.

There are some interesting parallels between the Diviners and real-world objectification of the female body in various cultures. But like in a lot of modern fantasy novels, traditional femininity is soon booted for a more marketable bad-ass bitchery, in which Six shrugs off her robes to don armour and fight.

The ensuing quest is very cut-and-paste, and the love story between Six and brooding knight Rodrick feels lab-created for Booktok girls. There's also a dissonance between the medieval setting and modern vernacular (try to repress the moment where Rodrick says "fan-fucking-tastic"). A story delving into the sisterly bonds between the Diviners, girls groomed to be objects of religious purity, would have felt more powerful. **Kimberley Ballard**



A DANCE OF LIES

★★★½☆

RELEASED **5 JUNE**

427 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Brittney Arena**

Publisher **Bloomsbury Publishing**

Courtly intrigue, royal feuds, debauched and handsome princes who are not all they seem... there's little massively original in the tropes here, but this debut romantasy novel is elevated by drawn-out tension and entertaining prose, as well as a character struggling with chronic pain, something informed by the author's own health struggles.

Vasalie is a dancer once feted by King Illian, until she was framed by him for murder and spent two years chained in a dark cell. Suddenly released, she must dance – and spy – at the upcoming Gathering of rulers to gain a pardon, and her freedom.

Dancing at all is near impossible for Vasalie after her confinement's toll on her body, but worse are the betrayals she's forced to commit in fear of ever returning to that cell. Illian's brother King Anton may be the friend she needs as she struggles to understand Illian's plans, but she may have lost her ability to trust in anyone again.

It's a story well told, with Vasalie's secrets slowly revealed and her relationships gradually developed. The trauma of her imprisonment – both mental and physical – is something she must overcome, and though her actions can be frustrating at times, they're always justified by her experiences. As the first part of a duology, there's an inevitable lack of resolution, but it's an enjoyable ride all the same. **Rhian Drinkwater**

DOCTOR WHO

Two times Fifteen

RELEASED **29 MAY**

176/205 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Authors **Emily Cook, Hannah Fergesen**

Publisher **BBC Books**

Will Ncuti Gatwa still be the Doctor by the time you read this? You may still be waiting to find out in the season finale – or starting what's potentially a long wait for more TV adventures... Either way, these spinoff novels may help to take the edge off.

Fear Death By Water ★★★☆☆ sees a lone Doctor meeting historic heroine Grace Darling, a lighthouse keeper's daughter who helped save nine people from a shipwreck in 1838. Of course, it's never quite that simple when the Doctor is involved, and the introduction of the alien Leviathan and the Thalassian people of the ISC (Intergalactic Sea Corps) help to up the SF ante.

Emily Cook nails the voice of the Doc from the start, enhancing the reader's immersion in his world (it's impossible to hear the line "Oh, you should try *cheese*-rolling, Seven" with anything other than Gatwa's infectious enthusiasm).

It's a slight tale though, more enjoyable in its "real world" sections exploring Grace's life and family than on the ISC ship, which never quite feels fully realised. A somewhat confusing climax and too-neat ending contribute to a swift, but generally uninspiring read.

In Hannah Fergesen's **Spectral Scream** ★★½☆☆ the Doctor and Belinda, still trying to set up vindicator readings, are assaulted by a psychic "scream" of pain from a nearby world. Tracking it down, they come across a crashed ship whose AI, Adama, has developed a full personality – but is also left in agony as his ship "body" physically deteriorates.

Between Adama, the descendants of the original crew, two bounty hunters and the evil Imperium still hunting the ship down, there's a lot going on, but it never quite gels. And one of the most interesting parts of the tale – that mycelium spores create a telepathic field around the planet, and the people who live there now have mushrooms growing over their bodies – is sadly under-explored. A story with potential that's unfortunately let down by clunky prose, too-convenient plot twists and unanswered questions. **Rhian Drinkwater**

i Grace Darling died aged just 26, of tuberculosis. Money gifted to her after the rescue was used in lifeboat development.

THE RAVEN SCHOLAR

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

646 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Antonia Hodgson**

Publisher **Hodderscape**

Volume one in an epic fantasy trilogy, and it's a doorstop with maps at the front. We know what you're thinking, but wait: this one is glorious.

It's narrated by ravens, for a start; specifically, by a flock of clever, petulant, argumentative and mostly non-corporeal ravens who are convinced of their own magnificence and have a sideline in snarky footnotes. Who can resist opinionated corvids?

Orrun is an empire holding its breath. The central principle of its religion is, essentially, appeasement: a fervent collective effort to not do anything to attract the attention of the Eight, whose Last Return is prophesied to destroy the world. In other Everything Is Fine news, there's a festival to choose the next Emperor, and one of the candidates has just been murdered. Unassuming academic Neema has four days to find out whodunnit, but her investigation is going to uncover a lot of dangerous secrets.

We'll be the first to admit that epic fantasy can sometimes be a bit po-faced, but Antonia Hodgson brings a dry, charming humour and a thriller-style pace to the high-stakes peril and twisty court intrigue. Dense with detail but impressively light on its feet, this is a smart, engaging book about smart, engaging people. **Nic Clarke**

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

288 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Ling Ling Huang**

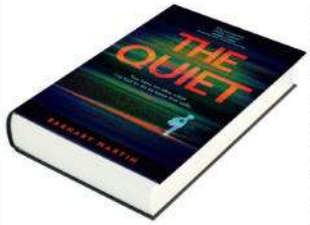
Publisher **Canelo**

Art and identity are at the heart of Ling Ling Huang's second novel, a strange tale of two women whose obsessive friendship leads to both fame and ruin.

Enka is an impoverished student at a prestigious art school in a post-AI future. There, she meets Mathilde, a troubled but prodigious talent. The two become friends, despite Enka's jealousy. Several years later, Mathilde is widely celebrated, while Enka has married into wealth, but achieved little artistically. Her billionaire husband's experimental "SCAFFOLD" technology, however, may be the answer to both Mathilde's emotional problems and Enka's artistic woes.

The book is told from Enka's point of view, and Huang does a fine job of highlighting the challenges she faces – notably a starkly delineated and misogynist class system – even as her selfishness and ego conspire to undo everything.

Huang's portrait of a bizarre future is sketchy in places – the impact of generative AI on the art world is only briefly touched on – but the final third, which explores SCAFFOLD's effects, is well told. She also writes beautifully of friendship, probing its knotty, sometimes problematic corners and making you care for these two women, despite their increasingly dramatic flaws. **Will Salmon**



THE QUIET

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Barnaby Martin**

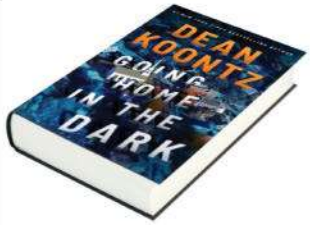
Publisher **Macmillan**

Humans have been forced to become nocturnal after a mysterious phenomenon known as the Soundfield creates a barrier around Earth, making the days too hot to bear. The Soundfield also creates a constant hum, occasionally punctuated by almost-musical "calls". And some children seem to be singing back...

Composer and music blogger Barnaby Martin's debut SF novel is certainly full of intriguing ideas, based on well-researched science about the correlation between human evolution and music. And when the book is chronicling the way scientists try to make sense of the new normal, it's a compelling read.

But Martin's attempts to dramatise his concepts are less successful, and reliant on some very familiar dystopian tropes (parent tries to keep "special" child secret from authoritarian regime). While the novel deals with themes of parenthood and communication, the characters never feel like they're living with a full deck of emotions. Part of the problem may be the paucity of visual description.

This might be a deliberate conceit in a story about sound, and the book is similarly – presumably deliberately, but ultimately frustratingly – vague when it comes to world-building, too. All of this means *The Quiet* is a great book to analyse, discuss and debate, but still feels like it has only done half its job. **Dave Golder**



GOING HOME IN THE DARK

★½☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

386 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Dean Koontz**

Publisher **Thomas & Mercer**

It would be easy to read a synopsis of suspense veteran Dean Koontz's latest novel – in which a group of friends return to their home town to confront a mystery evil they encountered in their childhood – and think, "Doesn't this sound like Stephen King's *It*?"

Strangely, this also seems to have occurred to Koontz, since what could have been a King pastiche is instead a baffling satirical comic fantasy that has more in common with a Douglas Adams novel (and is about as frightening).

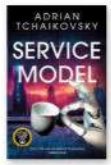
The plot follows a trio of friends who are pulled back to the quiet streets of Maple Grove when their old amigo Ernie sinks into a mysterious coma. They're soon realising that their childhood memories have been manipulated, and that something inhuman is waiting to even the score with them.

However, Koontz is in no rush to reveal what it is, instead embarking on rambling digressions on multiple aspects of modern life, and milking the whimsical comedy so hard that virtually every scene becomes borderline excruciating.

Buried under the leaden jokes and winkingly self-referential storytelling is a potentially effective portrait of friendship and growing up – but only the most forgiving die-hard Koontz fans will be up to the challenge of actually finding it. **Saxon Bullock**

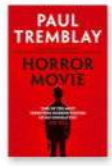
REISSUES

Our paperback pick is Adrian Tchaikovsky's **SERVICE MODEL** (★★★★☆, 22 May, Tor). This satirical tale is centred on Charles, a robotic valet who inexplicably kills his



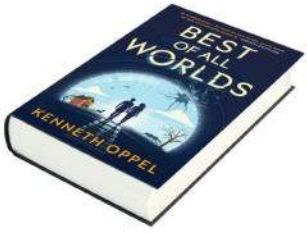
wealthy human owner. Fleeing, he goes on a quest to find a new Master – and work out why he committed murder. We said: "Tchaikovsky's Douglas Adams-esque ear for the absurd keeps things tripping along, with the naïve Charles proving to be an engaging and sympathetic 'hero'". SA MacLean's "cosy fantasy" **THE PHOENIX KEEPER** (★★★½☆, 29 May, Gollancz) centres on a socially inept member of staff at a zoo devoted to magical creatures. In the wake of a phoenix heist, it gets the chance to become a breeding

centre for the firebirds. We said: "Charming and gently humorous, but could do with a few more twists, and labours a little too long on its central character's nerdiness." Finally, Paul Tremblay's latest is **HORROR MOVIE** (★★★☆☆, 10 June, Titan). In 1993, a group of filmmakers worked on a low-budget horror film that never saw release. 30 years on, a young director mounts a Hollywood remake, getting the only surviving cast member to resume his role. We said: "An engaging mystery, with more than one nasty surprise along the way...



But the story is told from the perspective of its least interesting character, and the themes all feel a little too familiar." The paperback edition comes with bonus content, like pages from Tremblay's notebooks.

Reviews



BEST OF ALL WORLDS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 3 JUNE

256 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Kenneth Oppel**

Publisher **Scholastic Press**

Imagine you wake up one morning and your house isn't where it was when you went to bed. Instead, it's been plopped down in a farm, in countryside that stretches as far as the eye can see, with no roads leading in or out. Oh, and there are goats screaming at you.

This is the mystery faced by young Canadian Xavier, his dad and his new (and very pregnant) stepmother in this YA tale. Somehow they've been scooped up and imprisoned inside a gigantic transparent dome. Thanks to the farm, they have everything they need to feed themselves, and they also inexplicably have power and water. But freedom? Nope.

What would you do? Would you buckle down and get to work planting crops, or would you lose your mind at the thought of who put you there? But that's not all: when another family suddenly turns up from the American Deep South, there's an inevitable – and surprisingly topical – clash of cultures.

Kenneth Oppel excels at weaving a realistic, occasionally chilling tale that manages to be both claustrophobic and expansive, touching on everything from grief to lust. It's less a story than it is a *mood*; a creepy, uplifting, head-scratching fairy tale. And, as a bonus, it will also teach you why male goats pee on their own heads. **Jayne Nelson**

SKIPSHOCK

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 JUNE

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Caroline O'Donoghue**

Publisher **Walker Books**

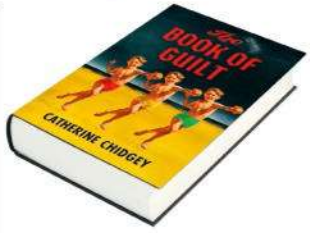
Stealth romantasy may not be a recognised subgenre yet, but if it's going to becomes one, the publication of *Skipshock* could be its defining moment.

Caroline O'Donoghue, an Irish writer previously most associated with edgy, witty chick lit and the YA book *All Our Hidden Gifts*, makes an impressive fantasy debut with a novel that introduces readers to a genuinely fresh-feeling otherverse.

Told from the points of view of the two main characters in alternating chapters, this is the tale of Irish schoolgirl Margo, who gets on a train for Cork but ends up alighting on another world completely, New Davia. But New Davia is just one of a number of worlds, linked by a rollercoastering rail line, all of which have differing lengths of day – some as short as two hours.

The place is ruled ruthlessly by the richer worlds to the "south" of the rail line, and they seem very eager to track down Margo. She's taken under the wing of a young travelling salesman, Moon (salesmen being the only northerners allowed to travel between worlds). But does he only really see her as a potential for profit?

The first half of a duology, *Skipshock* is a fun, fast-moving, ideas-packed fantasy first of all, which only reveals itself as a charming and surprisingly light-handed romantasy as it rattles along. Not just for Mills & Barsoom fans. **Dave Golder**



THE BOOK OF GUILT

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Catherine Chidgey**

Publisher **John Murray**

This eerie coming-of-age novel takes place in an alternate '70s. William, Vincent and Lawrence are triplets living at Captain Scott House, a care home in the New Forest for "Sycamore Children" – though what that phrase means is a mystery that Catherine Chidgey's novel teases out only gradually. A new Conservative government is in power and has decided to close the homes and send the children to live with "normal" families, despite previous attempts to integrate them having led to disaster...

The boys live strange lives, watched over by Mothers Morning, Afternoon and Night. They're fed medicine to protect them from a pernicious (and possibly mythical) "bug", and their dreams are monitored. There's something disquieting about them, especially the aggressive William, but Chidgey's empathetic writing never lets you forget that they are just kids. Unusual and uncanny, but they're not the Midwich Cuckoos.

There's a fairy tale quality to *The Book Of Guilt*. The triplets dream of moving to the "Big House" in Margate – a fate that never stops sounding like a sinister euphemism – and they're visited by the government's Minister of Loneliness, a woman who knows far more than she's letting on. Haunting and strange, Chidgey's novel hides menace beneath its layers of 70s nostalgia. **Will Salmon**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. A mystery thriller that weaves in elements of SF, Adam Oyebanji's **ESPERANCE** (22 May, Arcadia) sees a Chicago detective investigating how a father and son were drowned in sea water, hundreds of miles from the sea. Somehow this connects to a Nigerian woman in Bristol, who has cybernetic implants. If you recognise Jessie Elland's name, it may be because you watch *Emmerdale* (she played Chloe Harris – you know, the one Noah Dingle stalked). Her debut **THE LADIE UPSTAIRS** (22 May, Baskerville) is a gory, gothic literary horror centred on a scullery maid who idolises the lady of the house. Lindsey Byrd's fantasy **THE SUN BLESSED PRINCE** (out now, Tor) centres on a "Giver" who can bring the dead back to life, and a "Reaper" who can kill with a touch. Though said chaps are on opposite sides of an endless war, feelings develop... Don't get too excited, though – they're separated for most of the book! Our reviewer enjoyed Sebastien de Castell's irreverent fantasy *The Malevolent Seven*, praising its "chaotic energy". Sequel **THE MALEVOLENT EIGHT** (22 May, Arcadia) sees Cade Ombra's band of mages trying to prevent a war between celestial and infernal beings kicking off in the mortal realm. Finally, the latest *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* book, James Swallow's **TOWARD THE NIGHT** (out now, Pocket Books), begins with Captain Pike and the *Enterprise* crew investigating bizarre signals, then getting drawn into the mystery of a Starfleet vessel that's been missing for over 90 years.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Joe Abercrombie

The fantasy author may be blasting out "The Anvil Of Crom" right now

LOU ABERCROMBIE

Describe the room in which you typically write.

We call it the nook, but it's a kind of subterranean cathedral of black marble with a pit of flames at one end in which I can throw the mutilated corpses of characters who displease me. It has a spiked throne, but I regret that, because it's very hard on the ass. I mostly write standing up.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

Generally, I must say, I prefer glorious silence, but for some scenes, a piece of film music sometimes suggests itself, and can help one get in the mood. I'm a sucker for the soundtrack to *Conan The Barbarian*.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

My habit of stopping writing and wandering off to play videogames.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

My fourth book, *Best Served Cold*, was my difficult second album. When I wrote my first trilogy, I got faster and faster with each book, and thought I'd only get faster still, but I hadn't realised how difficult it would be starting with new characters, in a story I hadn't been thinking about for years, with a deadline and some level of expectation. It came together in the end, but it made me realise that every book is a new battle.

> "When I read my books I think, "Wow, I used to be good at this""

Were you a keen reader as a child?

I was a very keen reader as a child, but don't read that much at all these days, and most of it non-fiction. I consumed an awful lot of fantasy in my youth, perhaps unsurprisingly: *The Lord Of The Rings* (of course), as well as *A Wizard Of Earthsea*, Michael Moorcock's Elric and Corum books, David Eddings's Belgariad, Poul Anderson's *Broken Sword*, Dragonlance, and so on.

If you could recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known, what would it be?

It's pretty well known, but my go-to recommendation is Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*. Amazing characters. The perfect revisionist western.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

There are loads of writers I admire, but the books that scare me most are my own. Whenever I read them I think, "Wow, I used to be good at this."

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

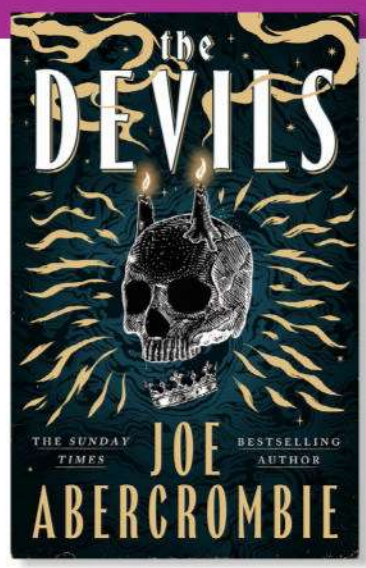
In a pink "for Mother's Day" display in Asda.

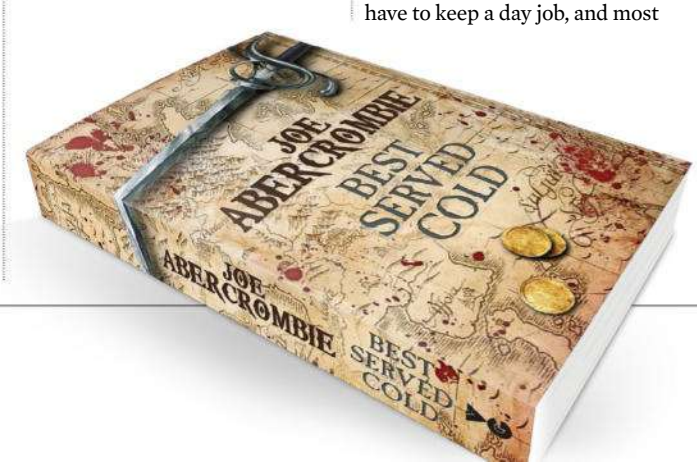
What would you say is the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

That getting published is necessarily life-changing. Most writers, even with a big publisher, have to keep a day job, and most books don't make that much impact. Building a career can take years, and it's getting harder and harder to do. Not much sweeping down marble staircases to rapturous applause. It's mostly pretty low-key, sitting at your desk, staring into the abyss of the blank page.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've either received or read?

My mother told me "Be honest". If you try to do that with every line you write, you shouldn't go too far wrong...





The Devils is out now, published by Gollancz.

© GOLLANCZ

ONE WORLD UNDER DOOM

The Emperor Strikes Back

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Ryan North**

Artist **RB Silva**

ISSUES 1-3 **Superhero event** comics aren't designed to be subtle – they're big, overblown tales of heroes tackling impossible threats. Marvel's latest massive crossover decides to take on politics, and it's not exactly surprising that it has ended up as quietly restrained as a sledgehammer to the face.

One World Under Doom picks up the plot thread from previous event *Blood Hunt*, in which metal-faced tyrant Doctor Doom hijacked the role of Sorcerer Supreme. Now, after months of silence, Doom has emerged from Latveria, declared himself Emperor of Earth, and begun using his powers to allegedly help humanity and save the planet.

Naturally, the Avengers and other Marvel heroes don't believe his positive intentions and set out to stop him – but gradually, to their horror, they find out Doom is worryingly good at both ruling the world and turning public opinion against them.

Clearly tailored with certain orange-faced authoritarian US politicians in mind, *One World Under Doom* is Marvel's biggest event in a while, with dozens of crossovers running alongside this core nine-issue miniseries. These first three chapters waste no time in delivering slickly executed action, and there are also some eye-catching visuals from artist RB Silva, but it's hard to deny that this gigantic event might already be a little *too* sprawling.

While the usual caveats of event comic storytelling are unavoidable (from the overstuffed cast to the minimal characterisation), writer Ryan North does pull off some lively set-pieces and fun twists – most notably that Doom is largely succeeding as Emperor because he's a skilled politician, rather than because he's using magic or mind control.

Unfortunately, it takes too long for the narrative to reach this point, with these first three issues seeing the Avengers trying (and failing) to defeat Doom so many times that the story gets repetitive. North also hasn't yet found a way to squeeze in the kind of small-but-memorable character moments that can make event comics truly shine, while the tonal jumps between "serious debates about democracy" and "Doctor Doom rides a robot dinosaur" are awkward and haphazard.

> **"Has ended up as quietly restrained as a sledgehammer to the face"**

Issue three's cliffhanger suggests the series is about to shift into a higher gear (and that Doom's arrogance will get the better of him). However, with six issues (and many crossovers) to go, *One World Under Doom* hasn't yet provided enough surprises to make it stand out from the crowd and stop it feeling like just another big dumb event comic. **Saxon Bullock**

i Ryan North has previously written and drawn gamebook adaptations of *Romeo And Juliet* and *Hamlet*.

BUG WARS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Image Comics**

Writer **Jason Aaron**

Artist **Mahmud Asrar**

ISSUES 1-3 **As one-sentence** pitches go, "Honey I Shrunk The Kids crossed with Conan The Barbarian" is certainly an attention-grabber, and new fantasy series *Bug Wars* is as unashamedly foolish as its ludicrous concept and blunt title suggests.

The story follows Slade, an insect-loving Alabama teenager who's unexpectedly shrunk by magical means and finds himself lost in the lethal landscape of his house's backyard. Here, a brutal and mythic battle is playing out between armies of ferocious insect warriors, and Slade soon finds his family history is linked with this new world in bizarre and terrifying ways...

Veteran comics writer Jason Aaron is a past master at muscular fantasy storytelling, and these first three issues quickly make it clear what kind of tone he's aiming for, serving up lots of gore, swearing and nudity. In a similar way to *Locke And Key*, *Bug Wars* is giving a traditional "kids' story" set-up a much darker twist – here, however, it's all in service of lurid, over-the-top violence that's fun but also deeply low-brow and aimed squarely at adolescent boys.

Mahmud Asrar's lively, colourful art brings plenty of pulpy energy and impact to the tale, but Aaron's approach is so broad and excessive that this offbeat take on sword and sorcery-style fantasy never quite coheres into a satisfying whole. **Saxon Bullock**

GODZILLA VS MARVEL

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writers **Ryan North, Gerry Duggan, Joe Kelly**
- Artists **John Romita Jr, Giuseppe Camuncoli, Nick Bradshaw**

ISSUES 1-3 **Unexpected** team-ups between different franchises never go out of style, and Marvel's latest example is a series of six out-of-continuity specials that pitch their classic heroes against Godzilla – the original Japanese version, not the bulked-up remix from the American films. These specials do a fine job of capturing the lurid, campy joys of Godzilla's '60s and '70s "Showa" era.

We're halfway through the series, which is moving through the history of the Marvel Universe decade by decade, so we've had the Fantastic Four confronting Godzilla in the '60s, a '70s-set battle between the big G and the Hulk, and an '80s post-*Secret Wars* Spider-Man romp in which the kaiju targets the Venom symbiote.

Godzilla Vs The Hulk by Gerry Duggan and Giuseppe Camuncoli is the highlight so far, pulling off an enjoyable monster mash but also mixing darker moments in with the kaiju action. *Godzilla Vs Fantastic Four* is fun but a lot more traditional, while *Godzilla Vs Spider-Man* often plays like a full-on *Airplane!*-style spoof of '80s Marvel comics.

With three showdowns to go (featuring the X-Men, the Avengers and Thor), this series is on course to be a loud and ludicrous yet enjoyable banquet of unpretentiously brainless blockbuster action. **Saxon Bullock**

If ever there was a time to be a little less superheroic...

SUPERMAN: THE LAST DAYS OF LEX LUTHOR

Saviour complex

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Black Label**
- Writer **Mark Waid**
- Artist **Bryan Hitch**

ISSUES 1-3 **This three-issue** miniseries demonstrates once again why *Kingdom Come* author Mark Waid remains our finest Superman scribe. Featuring typically widescreen and detail-packed art from Bryan Hitch, it's both a smart character study of comics' greatest supervillain and an epic adventure.

Lex Luthor is dying. Following an experiment gone wrong his body is suffering from cellular decay, leaving him with just days to live. Fortunately, he knows that the Man of Steel always responds to cries for help – even from his worst enemy. What follows is an episodic travelogue through different parts of the Superman mythos as these two unlikely allies strive together to find a way to save Lex's life.

The question of whether Superman *should* try to save the life of a mass murderer whose very existence is a constant threat to humanity lingers over the series, making this in some ways a latter-day companion piece to Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's classic Batman tale *The Killing Joke*. Certainly, there are many very good reasons to let nature take its course, but Superman's most affecting quality has always been his limitless compassion.

The DC Black Label badge (which means this is an out-of-continuity tale) proves to be a boon here – you're never quite sure how much you can trust Lex, or what the consequences will be for Kal-El should he succeed in saving him. That lends an ominous sense of finality to the third issue, which sees Superman risk everything for a man who very much wishes him dead. **Will Salmon**

i Mark Waid has described the comic as a "spiritual successor" to *Birthright*, his miniseries retelling Superman's origin.

MAROC THE MIGHTY

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **22 MAY**
- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writer **Unknown**
- Artists **Don Lawrence, Alfredo Marculeta**

COLLECTION **He's renowned** for "The Rise And Fall Of The Trigan Empire", but artist Don Lawrence may have found his perfect calling with this rather more obscure strip, first published in *Lion* in the '60s.

Lawrence cut his teeth on homegrown superhero Marvelman before illustrating such historical yarns as "Karl The Viking" and "Olac The Gladiator". "Maroc The Mighty" combines these skill sets into a medieval superhero: a British knight in the Crusades, who inherits a mystical bracelet that bestows superstrength. Like any self-respecting superhero, Maroc has his own chest symbol and a personal Kryptonite – the bracelet only works when the sun's out.

This is classic boys' weekly fare, set in a 13th century that's informed as much by *The Arabian Nights* as the historical record. Swamp beasts, giants and legendary cities co-exist with Mongol hordes and the armies of Saladin. Maroc wanders this perilous land with a firm sense of fair play, like Conan the Barbarian if only he'd gone to Sunday school.

Lawrence clearly relishes the detail, bringing meticulous draftsmanship to everything from chain mail to elephant hide. The inclusion of a bonus strip from the 1967 *Lion Annual* – featuring crude work by a different artist – only underlines his genius. **Nick Setchfield**

SECOND SHIFT

★★★★½

- RELEASED **5 JUNE**
- Publisher **Avery Hill Publishing**
- Writer/artist **Kit Anderson**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Space, as a great** writer once understated, is big. It's also a lonely sort of environment for humans to work in. Cartoonist Kit Anderson taps into this sense of interstellar isolation – and paranoia – in her enigmatic debut graphic novel.

Birdie Doran works for Terracorp, processing asteroids on a remote outpost. There are other workers, Heck and Porter, who Birdie crosses paths with occasionally, but for the most part this is a solitary gig.

Between shifts the workers "drop out" and are placed in stasis, where they experience "company exclusive DreamSpace®", and they're in constant contact with Station, the outpost's AI, which takes the form of various talking animals. One day, however, Birdie and Heck happen upon a *second* processing station – and begin to question everything they believed to be true about the company and their mission.

Second Shift is a meditatively strange science fiction tale with echoes of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Silent Running* and Pornsak Pichetshote's recent comic *Man's Best*. Anderson's art has an appropriately dream-like quality – paradoxically claustrophobic while also conjuring an uncanny sense of the vastness of space. And while the central mystery is certainly tinged with menace, *Second Shift* is more interested in the psychological hinterlands that its characters inhabit.

Will Salmon

Madness... they call it madness. THE Madness.

TVA

Trail Of The Time Lords

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Katharyn Blair**
- Artist **Pere Pérez**

ISSUES 1-5 **Even those who** complain about the ever-expanding Marvel multiverse should enjoy this enthralling miniseries, which neatly connects the on-screen MCU with the comic book Earth-616.

Loki screenwriter Katharyn Blair assembles an eclectic line-up that blends established TVA members such as Mobius, OB and B-15 with Gwen Stacy's Ghost-Spider, super-soldier Captain Peggy Carter, an alternate dimension version of Gambit and Wolverine's son Jimmy Hudson.

A reformed Miss Minutes is joined by fellow AIs Doc Clock and Sir Seconds – whose cod cockney accent channels Dick Van Dyke – and Goddess of Mischief Sylvie later makes her comics debut (although Loki is absent).

Building on *Loki*'s somewhat baffling conclusion, Blair weaves in references not only to *Deadpool & Wolverine* – although the incarcerated Mr Paradox regrettably doesn't appear – but also some ominous allusions to *WandaVision* and *Agatha All Along*. The "new and improved" Time Variance Authority are haunted by the Madness, disturbing hallucinations that lead them not only to New Orleans and Daimon Hellstrom's infernal Hell Town but also the TVA's previously hidden Deferment Department.

This leads to the discovery of a Scarlet Witch who might not be the Wanda Maximoff you're expecting, while the big reveal of the villain behind the scenes is truly the stuff of bad dreams.

Enhanced by Guru-eFX's vibrant colours, Pere Pérez's fluid linework resembles a more expressive Dave Gibbons, and he captures the various TVA actors' likenesses. "Intriguing" and "fascinating", as OB and Mobius say, this five-parter has significant implications for both Marvel's on-screen and comic book universes. **Stephen Jewell**

i MCU films are Katharyn Blair's comfort movies: "*Winter Soldier* is what I put on in the background when I wanna work out."

THE HAUNTING OF JILLY JOHNSON

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writer **Unknown**
- Artist **Rafael Busóm Clúa**

COLLECTION **While British boys'** comics traded in sweat, bullets and jingoism, girls' weeklies often pursued an altogether spookier agenda.

Take this strip from 1979. Originally published in the pages of *Pink*, summoning a macabre chill between pop star pin-ups and pocket money beauty tips, it finds a young woman renting a new flat only to encounter the sinister spirit of the previous tenant.

Such urban paranormal activity is clearly born of the age of Amityville and the Enfield poltergeist, but what's more interesting is the collision of ghost story and trad romance strip. For all the occult trimmings, it's jealousies and misunderstandings between bubble-haired Jilly and her similarly coiffed boyfriend that prove the real peril here ("I'll never break up with Dave... Never!").

The horror may be mild but Spanish artist Rafael Busóm Clúa brings an expressive flair to Jilly's plight, mixing '70s fashion and glamour with just a glimmer of psychedelia. He also illustrates "The Island Of Stones", a 1975 *Pink* strip that sees tourists lured to a Greek isle and the clutches of a sculptor wielding the immortal power of Medusa herself. Wilder and more entertaining than the main feature, it reads like the blueprint for the greatest Amicus movie never made. **Nick Setchfield**

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

Parry, je t'aime

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**
- Publisher **Kepler Interactive**

VIDEOGAME **You'd be forgiven for** mistaking *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* for a new and more grown-up *Final Fantasy* – that is if that long-running RPG series hadn't controversially ditched a lot of traditional elements like strategic turn-based battles, a large playable cast of characters, and the occasional weird and goofy creature design.

It's not an exercise in nostalgia though, with confident new France-based studio Sandfall Interactive punching well above its weight in its exquisite Belle Epoque-inspired vision of a dark fantasy world where a god-like Paintress can wipe out its people just by painting the number of their age each year. As an expedition made up of mostly 32-year-olds with a year left before their demise, it's up to you to try and break this death cycle.

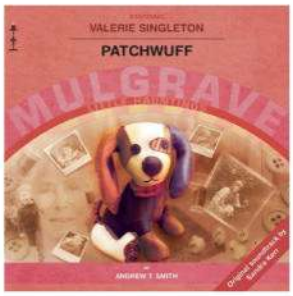
There's a melancholic vibe to proceedings, with a heart-breaking soundtrack reminiscent of the *Nier* series driving home how this is essentially a suicide mission, and you'll often come across journals and checkpoints of the failed expeditions that came before you. That it never gets overwhelmingly bleak is down to an eloquent script, and nuanced performances from a star-studded cast that includes alumni from *Baldur's Gate 3* as well as screen actors Charlie Cox and Andy Serkis, whose characters all have their own reasons to fight, where nothing is black and white.

Those overwhelming odds are felt strongest in turn-based battles that feature action-based mechanics like *Paper Mario*, if it was designed by the same masochists behind *Dark Souls*. While your party members have their own individual mechanics and you can exploit weaknesses with elemental magic, the most essential part of battle comes when it's the enemy's turn, as you can dodge or parry their attacks.

It's supremely satisfying when the parries connect as your party can dish back devastating counters, but there's also risk as timings can feel unforgiving and longer combos test your memory recognition and nerves to breaking point. Regardless, the will to keep fighting and defy your fate never falters. **Alan Wen**

i For more authenticity, you can play with French audio. Naturally, characters still swear in French in the English dub.

"Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir?" "Non."



PATCHWUFF

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **3 June (download)/ July (vinyl)**
- Running time **14 minutes**
- Format **Vinyl/download**
- Publisher **Mulgrave Audio**

AUDIO DRAMA **With *Little Hauntings***, their ongoing series of narrated stories, Mulgrave Audio are fast becoming a hauntological equivalent of Big Finish. This third in the strand is the one with the slenderest rationale for inclusion in *SFX* so far – on the basis that Bagpuss (dear Bagpuss, old fat furry cat-puss) and his friends were magical creations.

It centres on a young boy who treasures a cloth dog made by his grandmother, recounting how the toy eventually inspired a television series – and how, after Peter leaves behind childish things, Patchwuff becomes a comfort once again in his dotage. Written in the simple register of a child's storybook, and clocking in at 14 minutes, it's a slight piece, but a quietly moving one – a bite-size meditation on ageing.

Mulgrave have pulled off a couple of coups here. Firstly, they've enlisted folk musician Sandra Kerr, who co-created the music for *Bagpuss*, to record two new songs (included separately in the package). It's impossible to ignore that Kerr's voice has become a little croaky, but given the story's emphasis on the ravages of time, this seems entirely appropriate.

Secondly, the story is narrated by *Blue Peter* icon Valerie Singleton. Add to that a pressing on 10" vinyl and you have a triple-dose nostalgia hit. **Calvin Baxter**

MAY 1995

In the first of a new regular feature, we look back at the month *SFX* was born

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

The City Of Lost Children: children not pictured.

FLASHBACK

French Fancy

17 MAY 1995 After opening the Cannes Film Festival, *La Cité Des Enfants Perdus* (*The City Of Lost Children*) was released across France, laying out a lavish visual banquet for cinemagoers.

The second feature collaboration by directorial duo Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, this surrealism-tinged steampunk fantasy sees Ron Perlman's strongman teaming up with a street kid to rescue her little brother – kidnapped by a cyborg cult and taken to a mad scientist's abandoned oil rig lair, to be subjected to a dream-extracting machine. The film's American star was cast after Caro saw his performance in Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos*. Speaking to *SFX* in 2022, the director remarked, "He has a wonderful face, Ron Perlman. It's like a sculpture or something." One problem: the actor didn't speak French. Fortunately, his character was the strong, silent type... Perlman worked with a vocal coach to learn the few phrases required.

The City Of Lost Children is awash with red and green, with Caro explaining to *SFX*, "When you create a world, you have to be really logical, and you have to have constraint – like a painter, to have a palette of colour." It also boasts an impressive practical scale. Inside Arpajon Studios, 30 minutes south of Paris, Caro and Jeunet's team constructed a stunningly immersive French port set – complete with 80cm-deep artificial sea and a 14-metre-high ship, pulled about by a tractor.

When they spoke to us, the pair were wistful about having the "luck" to work in such a way – considering it now a thing of the past. "It was so huge," Jeunet told *SFX*, "and the sea with the wave machine was *amazing*. Now we shoot with just a wall behind the actor, and everything would be made in CGI."

"It was the last time we could do that in France, a movie in a real studio with real sets with a very big size," added Caro, offering just one example of how meticulous their approach to creating this self-contained world was. "It was a really great pleasure for me and [production designer] Jean Rabasse to discuss about the mortar on the bricks and everything."

Etchings of London streets by French illustrator Gustave Doré and paintings by Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico were key influences.

School Days

18 MAY 1995 By 1995, *Doctor Who* had been off-air for five years, but Virgin Books were helping to keep the flame alive with their licensed range The New Adventures.

The 38th entry, Paul Cornell's *Human Nature*, sees the Seventh Doctor seeking to understand his companion's grief by using a device which alters his biodata, effectively making him human. He then lives as a history teacher at a public school in 1914 England – falling in love with colleague Joan in the process.

Interviewed in 2002, Cornell explained that reading Joseph Campbell (author of *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*) had sparked the idea of applying the literature professor's concept of "the hero's journey" to the Doctor. "Nobody had done the *Superman 2* scenario where we learn who the character is by taking away his powers, associations, literary clothes etc, to see what the essentials are."

The nature of the villains was in flux for some time, with the author considering terrorists with Krynoid pods (killer plants) and a "gang" of thirteen incarnations of one Time Lord. Eventually he settled on the Aubertides, a family group of aliens out to acquire the Doctor's genetic material and thereby gain the ability to regenerate.

Human Nature was well-received, topping a 1998 poll as the best of the range. In 2006 it received an arguably even greater accolade, when Russell T Davies asked Cornell to adapt the book for TV. The resulting two-parter retained key elements while making some additions, like creepy living scarecrows (the showrunner's idea). Eighteen years on, it's still regularly rated one of the top 10 TV stories.

PICTURES: STUDIO CANAL+, DOCTOR WHO BOOKS, UNITED ARTISTS, PULP/ISLAND RECORDS. STOCK ART: NEUEVECTOR/GETTY

"Scully, I'm getting the evils from a skellington."

1995 FOX/GETTY

Fox Hunting

19 MAY 1995 Stateside, season two of *The X-Files* concluded in gripping fashion with "Anasazi", the opening instalment of a Chris Carter three-parter.

At this stage it was still possible to believe that the showrunner's "mythology episodes" might actually lead to definitive answers. Now we know better, but the episode still stands up as a pacey paranoid thriller which generates a strong sense that no character is safe. Centred on a digital tape full of encrypted US government UFO files, it sees Scully clipped by a bullet, Mulder sent screwy by a drugged water supply, and his father – revealed, in a shock twist, to be a past associate of Cigarette Smoking Man – shot dead. A cliffhanger ending in which Mulder is apparently killed, as a boxcar stacked with weird corpses is torched, is the cherry on top.

Behind the scenes, the biggest challenge was recreating the New Mexico desert in a Vancouver quarry: the crew turned the rocks red by applying 1,600 gallons of paint! Hmm, wonder if it's still red today?

Pulp: better than Robson & Jerome.

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** John Major.
- **US President:** Bill Clinton.
- **In the charts:** A Robson & Jerome cover of "Unchained Melody" begins an agonising seven-week run at number one – keeping Pulp's "Common People" (lead single from the Different Class album) off top spot.
- **In the news:** Kenny Dalglish leads Blackburn Rovers to the Premier League title. Norway win the Eurovision Song Contest; the UK's Love City Groove trail in tenth. And in Japan, police raid the HQ of doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo.

ON THE SHELF

- New sci-fi magazine *SFX* hits WH Smith on 25 May 1995. Lori Petty's Tank Girl is the cover star. Also inside: author Iain M Banks is interviewed; the Couch Potato team binge *Star Trek: Voyager*.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

BRIAN CLEMENS

How well do you know the life and career of the Avengers supremo?

Quizmaster **Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large**

QUESTION 1
How many feature films did Clemens direct during his career?

QUESTION 2
Which *Doctor Who* writer teamed up with Clemens to write 1970 thriller *And Soon The Darkness*?

QUESTION 3
Clemens claimed to be a distant relation of which renowned American writer?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this Steed sidekick – full name please!

QUESTION 5
The Professionals starred Lewis Collins and Martin Shaw. On which Clemens production were they first teamed?

QUESTION 6
Who composed the theme tunes to *The Avengers*, *The New Avengers* and *Thriller*?

QUESTION 7
Clemens wrote nine episodes of *Danger Man*. What was the name of the spy played by Patrick McGoohan?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this '60s series – for which Clemens wrote two episodes – from its title sequence.

QUESTION 9
Disney's spooky 1980 offering *The Watcher In The Woods* – for which Clemens wrote the initial screenplay – starred which Hollywood legend?

QUESTION 10
Clemens wrote *Highlander II: The Quickening*. What's the name of the Immortals' home planet?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
Clemens also wrote 1973's *The Golden Voyage Of Sinbad*. Who played sinister sorcerer Koura?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Which infamous group does Emma Peel infiltrate in this classic episode of *The Avengers*?

QUESTION 13
High-tech adventure drama series *Bugs* began in which year? a) 1993 b) 1994 c) 1995.

QUESTION 14
What was the name of the *Avengers*-style TV movie Clemens wrote for the US in 1978?

QUESTION 15
Who were the titular stars of 1971's Hammer chiller *Dr Jekyll And Sister Hyde*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Supply the title we've removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 17
Name the actress originally cast as Emma Peel, who was let go after filming one-and-a-half episodes to be replaced by Diana Rigg.

QUESTION 18
Clemens created *Thriller* in 1973. By what name was this anthology show first known in the US?

QUESTION 19
Which fictional law enforcement unit did Bodie and Doyle work for in *The Professionals*?

QUESTION 20
Joanna Lumley played Purdey in *The New Avengers*. What inspired the character's name?

Answers
1 One 2 Terry Nation 3 Mark Twain 4 Mike Gambit 5 *The New Avengers* 6 Laurie Johnson 7 John Drake 8 *Adam Adamant Lives!* 9 Bette Davis 10 Zeist 11 Tom Baker 12 The Hellfire Club 13 c) 1995 14 *Escapade* 15 Ralph Bates and Martine Beswick 16 *Captain Kronos – Vampire Hunter* 17 Elizabeth Shepherd 18 *Menace* 19 CI5 20 The shotgun brand

How did you do?

Rate yourself by Steed's boss

0-5	Second Cousin
6-10	Nephew
11-15	Sister
16-19	Father
20	Mother

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"I'm just wearing tit tape."

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All contents are subject to change, or no one being available from a massive tent-pole movie "itches chin".

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Never take sweets from strangers, kids.

The Child Catcher

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

If I stumble upon *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* airing on a bank holiday afternoon, I'm torn. "Me Ol' Bamboo" is a banger. Who can resist a car that can turn into a hovercraft *and* fly? And then there's Baroness Bomburst's suspenders... On the other hand, this children's musical is a very syrupy affair.

Even as a nipper, "Truly Scrumptious" left me in need of a sickbag. What decides whether I switch channels is generally how close inventor Caractacus Potts and co are to landing in the faux Germanic nation "Vulgaria", and encountering the sinister Child Catcher.

It's a movie-stealing performance by eighth-billed Australian actor Robert Helpmann, despite the fact that between thundering past on his carriage and ending up trapped in a giant net, he's only on-screen for seven or eight minutes. He's a memorably graceful villain – whether skipping about the town square, or striding into the nearby castle, Helpmann puts his ballet training to very good use.

With his boggling eyes, wheedling tone and maniacal cackle, he's also the ultimate fictional warning that you shouldn't take sweets (or indeed treacle tarts) from strangers. As he lures Potts's "kiddiwinks" into a cage with offers of free lollipops, his dark purpose disguised beneath a coat decorated with flowers, it's easy to think of real-life monsters like Jimmy Savile.

Absent from Ian Fleming's original books, the character has sparked debate. Some argue he belongs to a tradition of antisemitic depictions of Jews, in part due to the character's long nose. (Though he acts like a *hunter* of Jews, which rather muddies the waters...)

This may be largely down to the fact that the screenplay was co-credited to Roald Dahl – who had a catalogue of antisemitic statements. The Child Catcher certainly seems like a Dahl creation, in line with other of his cruel villains. However, director Ken Hughes (who reworked the script) insisted *he* was responsible, telling *Film Review* in 1996, "In something like that you need a wicked witch or an evil queen. So I got to thinking what sinister thing can we have to frighten the shit out of all the kids, and it was a Child Catcher!"

Regardless of where you ascribe credit/blame, I'm not entirely convinced. If the Child Catcher's pointy beak reminds me of anything, it's a bird – an impression underlined by his jet-black clobber, skipping gait, and the raven-like cries he makes on getting his comeuppance. For me, he's a close relative of the Penguin – one who's every bit as iconic. ●

Ian is blessed with a sensitive snout.

Fact Attack!

- As a choreographer for Sadler's Wells during the Second World War, Helpmann created a ballet of *Hamlet*, set to Tchaikovsky's music.
- During a rehearsal, the Child Catcher's carriage flipped over, but Helpmann skipped away from danger – impressing Dick Van Dyke.
- Child star Heather Ripley recalled Helpmann as "the least scary person I've ever met in my life – he couldn't have been more charming".
- The black coat which Robert Helpmann wore as the Child Catcher was sold at auction by Propstore in 2017. It fetched £3,360.
- The stage musical gives the Child Catcher (Richard O'Brien in the original 2002 production) his own song: "Kiddy-Widdy-Winkies".

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